THE DEATH CERTIFICATE

P SACHIDANANDAN

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1

The clerk at the crematory flared up at me for no reason at all: 'What do you want? At this hour of daybreak?' Perhaps because he was furious, or perhaps because he had an unusually wide mouth, one or two drops of saliva splashed from his mouth on to the table when he spoke. He glared at me as if I had no right whatsoever to be there.

My pitiable state did not permit me to counter his anger with anger. Does not a man in misery and misfortune, whoever he be, deserve to be treated with consideration? Should the executioner vent his anger on a convict?

It is true that today I had arrived at the burning-ground looking like a businessman, wearing a tie and carrying a briefcase, but I could not believe that he did not recognise me. It was only two days ago that it had all happened. Moreover, while igniting the funeral pyre that day, when I felt giddy and fell down, it had been this very man who had laid me on the bench in this office and sprinkled water on my face.

Controlling my grief and gathering my resources of strength I said, 'Please for God's sake search for it. You had noted it down somewhere in your register.... It was last Tuesday. You said you'd give it to me if I came to you after two days.... the death—'

As I looked at his face I felt unable to continue. He fixed a stare at me over the rim of his spectacles which had slid down his nose probably because one of his ears was smaller

than the other. Because his mouth was so wide his pendulous lower lip seemed to dangle under his snub nose. A vague fear gripped me and not knowing what I should do, I stood there scratching my chin.

It was then that I remembered the receipt that the firewood vendor at the burning ground had given me when I had bought the firewood and other things that day. Thinking it could not be of any use to me, I had been about to crumple up the receipt and throw it away, when he had said, 'Don't throw it away brother, you might need it. What other proof do you have with you when you come to claim the certificate?' I shivered. It was true, what other proof did I have? The man had ceased to exist. I searched my pockets with a trembling hand. No, the receipt had not been lost.

When he saw the receipt the clerk's manner changed completely. He leaned forward in his chair. He pushed his glasses up. Taking the paper from me he held it by one corner between his thumb and forefinger and scrutinised it, turning it from one side to the other many times. After that, he held it against the sunlight and examined it as one would a counterfeit note. He read what was written on it, first peering at it closely and then holding it well away from him. Finally, his lower lip quivering, he smiled and gave it back to me with a look of approval as if everything was in order.

'Two days. It's just two days, mister,' he continued smiling. 'Didn't I tell you to come after a week?'

He had asked me to come after two days. But what was the use of reminding him of that? Looking at his mocking smile I did not think I would be able to convince him. And even if I did, the certificate would not be ready. I had neither the time nor the inclination for arguing or quarrelling. A week then, if it must be so. At least he had not refused to give it to me. Admitting that the mistake was

mine and begging to be excused for the trouble I had given him, I turned and walked away.

Either because I was walking absent-mindedly or because my eyes had inadvertently turned towards the shed where the cremations took place, while coming down the steps of the office I collided with the younger of the clerk's two children who were playing in the courtyard. The boy fell down but soon got up and holding both his hands to his head started to scream. From the first floor of the office, where the clerk had his quarters, his wife, who had been cleaning the floor inside, a well-built woman with her hair gathered tightly into a knot over her head, appeared on the verandah and began to shout at me. 'These people have neither eyes nor ears. Where do they look when they walk?...' I said nothing. I lowered my head and walked on.

Such is the nature of all misfortunes. The victim is not only buffeted but rendered utterly helpless. Helpless not only to escape but even to complain.

In my efforts to get things done I have had to face the anger and indifference of any number of clerks. I have repeatedly entered offices most unashamedly even after I have been banned entry. I endured all this humiliation thinking that this was part of a salesman's job. But I had never thought that I would have to stand before the crematory clerk with my hand on my chin. And now I had to put up with his wife's rebukes as well. Grief destroys one's shame and self respect. Where grief is present nothing else can remain.

Briefcase in hand, I walked on. Though I was sweating profusely I did not loosen the knot of my tie.

The narrow road in front of the burning ground had been dug up completely on one side for the laying of sewer pipes. Traffic lights had not yet been installed at the point where the road joined the highway crossing and pedestrians had to make their way across at their own risk. A little

further down, a housing society was constructing some buildings, and since walls had not yet been erected around the plot, one could still take the short cut that the railway commuters had made through it to reach the station quickly. While walking along, I decided not to go to the office today. So I did not take the short cut but walked along the road, through the level crossing, and proceeded homeward. I felt very tired and ill.

It had been going on for days, this feeling of sitting before a clock whose springs were growing increasingly taut with movement. I had watched the days shrink into hours, the hours into minutes, the minutes into seconds. Till the springs snapped at last, and time slowly shrunk into a drop.

The first signs of illness. Fatigue. Followed by tests and uncertainty. Light and darkness, hope and fear, played hide-and-seek in the X-ray films. Then the withdrawal of hope. The entry of pain. Helplessness...a man sat with his head bent, as if before an executioner. Abandoning everything yet understanding all. Having faith in nothing yet holding on tightly. Then darkness started to close in from the wings. Movement slowed into a still point. But the drama had not ended. The lights on stage still shone. And movement passed through zero into the negative co-ordinate. The actor was being transformed into a negative; where the black was white and where the white was black.

I did not feel that it was death that had taken place. It was life that had ended. Time had moved to a different quadrant. Space remained the same. Substance too.

In any case, how can death *happen*? How can a man who speaks, thinks, argues, laughs, suddenly cease to be one day, in an instant, in the fraction of a second?

But neither neighbours nor relatives wasted time on such questions. They contacted those who were nearby, telephoned those who were not there, to tell them that he was dead.

The motionless body alone claimed their attention. So many came forward to lay it out on the bamboo bier, to bind it closely as if to hide it from all eyes, to bear it quickly to the burning ground. The firewood vendor, the crematory clerk, were all partners in this. The act of destroying all evidence left of a man's existence.

True, I too had gone next morning to the burning ground, picked up a few shattered, crushed bones from the steel platform where the pyre had burnt itself out and brought them home. The remains of a man I had seen and known all my life, with whom I had talked, argued and laughed are shrunk to these broken bones. And did I not gather the remains and bring them home only to throw them into the sea? When all evidence is erased, when all the remains are thrown away, what is left? The receipt given by the firewood vendor for the firewood and other things. And the death certificate that the crematory clerk has promised to give me after a week.

2

The man who lives on the seventh floor, directly below my flat, was waiting near the lift. He looked at me for a moment wondering whether or not to smile and decided at last to just nod his head in recognition. We stood there for a while watching the red indicator light climb up and down. Looking at the briefcase in my hand, he finally asked:

'Why have you come back?'

'I started out then decided not to go,' I answered, 'I feel tired.'

'Rest for a few days,' he suggested. 'How long is it since you slept or ate properly? The living also have to carry on.'

When the lift started to go up, he continued:

'It is difficult to forget, when one thinks about it. What a man he was! And what an age to die. Thirty-five years.'

I said nothing. I stood watching the number of each floor flash past through the door of the lift.

It seemed as if everyone at home had expected me to return. No one questioned me. My wife opened the door and went straight back into the house. Someone was sobbing inside, probably reminded of the deceased by some object he had used. I did not try to find out who was weeping. The two children were sitting on the floor playing a game of riddles in a notebook. I put my briefcase down and sank into a chair, loosened my tie and heaved a sigh.

When my wife brought me tea I took the glass from her and said, as if to myself:

'I'm extending my leave by another two days.'

She said nothing.

I got up and went to the balcony and started to watch the local trains run to the left and right on the railroad tracks. And then I suddenly remembered the oxygen cylinder which had been bought for the deceased. Why keep it any more? I went in, packed away the bottle and the tubes in their boxes, fixed the cylinder on the trolley and started out to the chemist's shop from where I had bought it.

Getting out of the lift I was pushing the trolley along the road when I saw coming towards me from the opposite direction the communist with whom I had happened to become acquainted in the course of the funeral rites. He was the neighbour of a friend and had come on hearing news of the death. He was working as an accountant in the

Communist Party office. Although he had no faith in the rites, he gave instructions as well as a priest. Everyone remarked on the way he managed everything as if he was personally involved.

Unlike the seventh floor tenant, he showed no hesitation when he saw me. He smiled brightly, raised his hands with a rolled-up newspaper between them and said namaste.

'Nothing the matter, I hope,' he said.

'No. Thank you for all the help you gave us.' Having said it, I felt foolish. Salesman that I was, voicing my thanks had become a habit with me.

'Oh, it's nothing,' he smiled again. 'Things must run smoothly. That is all I wanted. Whoever it be, wherever it be, all human beings have need of one another.'

He came along with me. We walked on pushing the trolley by turns.

In front of the cigarette kiosk I handed the trolley over to him and went to buy a packet of cigarettes. He had given up smoking because his wife insisted on his doing so after she had seen the reports on cancer and smoking.

He talked mostly of his wife and children. He was a man who had deep affection for his family. One of his sons worked in a textile mill. Another in a bank. A military officer had married his daughter and taken her to some faraway place. 'When they are young, like seeds, you can hold them in your lap. But when they become full-grown trees?' he asked me. 'In their old age husband and wife are alone once again. I always say that a man has two phases of married bliss. If I go home late even a single day she quarrels with me. Just like in the old days!'

He smiled in happiness and pride.

What is the meaning of all this pleasure, this happiness, I wondered. Two days ago a man, even though he had been in acute pain, spoke and asked for things. Today, if one searched for him, where could he be found? I nearly

said to him, once something like this happens the world will never be the same again. But I did not say it. Why spread my darkness in another's house? But could it spread anyway, even if I tried? Darkness can be dispelled by light. But darkness cannot dispel light. He was saying, 'Whatever is lost, is lost. One must always look towards what lies ahead.' For him, it was forbidden to think of the seed once the tree was full-grown. He was a communist.

At the level crossing, even though we were not in any hurry, we cut across in front of a moving train, pushing the trolley. Once on the other side we smiled at one another as if we had achieved a great feat.

'I must go now. I came out promising to be back at once. Can't go to the office without stepping in at home.' The communist spoke as if his sole purpose had been to guide me across the railway line.

I walked on through the crowds with my trolley and the packages. In this short time I had acquired some skill in manoeuvring the trolley, in negotiating turns and applying brakes. So I walked unthinkingly, alone, like a bull under its yoke.

As soon as he saw me, the chemist, who was at the counter, ran out to the road and grasped my hand. Putting his other hand around me, he embraced me. I stood on the road with my trolley and packages. 'What a calamity! the cruelties that God inflicts on man!' he said in a trembling voice. I saw his eyes fill with tears.

I was touched by the sympathy of this man whom I had met only once when I had been to the shop to get oxygen. Not knowing what to say I stood there looking over his shoulder into the distance.

'I didn't even know. Why didn't you let me know? It was only when I saw you coming with the cylinder just now that I guessed. How terrible! God...' He spoke as if a cylinder was brought back only if the patient died.

I did not reply to that either.

At that moment, either his hand or mine must have brushed against the cylinder. The valve opened and oxygen started to gush out with a loud hiss. That was the oxygen remaining in the cylinder. I had watched the sinews of the dead man throb and writhe as he struggled for air in the last few minutes. The valve had been opened wide at that time. The speed at which the bubbles had moved had caused the water in the Woolf's bottle to boil. And yet it had all been wasted. Unable to enter the lungs, it kept coming back. Truly, this was a tool of death not of life to be used till the crevices of the lungs were completely filled with neoplasm, after which it would start coming back through the valve through the Woolf's bottle, through the nose, through the throat, through the mouth. It returned as something useless, superfluous. The sound of the oxygen escaping from the cylinder made me feel ill. The oxygen that would be used for someone else to die—till the crevices of his lungs were filled with neoplasm.

'Close it, close it!' I shouted helplessly, unable to do anything because I held the packages in one hand and the chemist's hand in the other.

His face suddenly turned pale. His grip slackened. He freed me. Stretching out his hand awkwardly, he closed the valve, then called some one from inside to take away the cylinder and went in himself, his head bent.

He pushed a chair towards me. 'I am sorry, I am very, very sorry,' he said, not daring to look at my face. The look on his face was that of a priest before a condemned prisoner.

'The fault is mine. I should not have spoken like that.' Once again, I took the blame upon myself. After all, it was not the fault of the oxygen. What can one do if there is no more place in the lungs?

But he was not willing to concede that. Leaving it to his

workers to hand out the drugs and make the bills, he sat there shaking his head. Too helpless even to acknowledge my own helplessness, I sat there watching the stream of patients moving past the counter buying their drugs and pills.

At last I requested him to make out my bill. When he did so he deliberately advanced the date of the purchase of the cylinder by three days and put back the date of its return by three days. With this alteration it looked as if the cylinder had been returned the day before the death. 'No, no, that is impossible.' I insisted that the bill be made out in its proper form. At first he would not agree but when I explained everything to him, he consented to advance the first date by four days and put back the second by two. He said he could do no less than that; in fact he should have done a great deal more as an expression of his feelings.

He followed me out on the road, saying, 'I'll come after a couple of days'. When I started to walk away, he called again from behind me, 'I'll definitely come and see you.'

Outside, I felt as if a great load had been taken off me. My hands were free. My feet had no weight. A whole day lay desolate before me.

Yet another reminder was gone. One object less to remember him by.

I did not hurry at the level crossing. I stood there a long time idly watching the trains go by, one after another. I bought a paan from the stall there, put it in my mouth. I lit a cigarette. Swinging my hands and puffing at my cigarette I walked down the road.

In the afternoon all the relatives went home after lunch. The house was quiet. I lay down on the sofa and slept for a long time. My acquaintance on the seventh floor was right. I had to catch up on days of sleep. I had kept dozing off wherever I sat.

But when I got up I did not feel refreshed at all. When,

even after tea, my wife saw me sitting there drowsily, all hunched up, she said, 'Why don't you take the children out for a while; how long are they to be shut in like this? What fault is it of theirs?' Yes, of course, they had done nothing wrong. It was nobody's fault; not the chemist's, nor the communist's nor the crematory clerk's. These were things that happened without cause, unexpectedly. This was how the old woman, our neighbour, explained it. She had lost two sons and had been widowed while young. 'When I lost two children, I gained four,' she said, 'my grandchildren. Is there a sorrow that cannot be forgotten when one looks at the faces of children?'

Everyone wished to forget. To sleep, eat, perform the repair and maintenance of their bodies, prepare them for further demands. It was not sorrow they grieved over but the incapacity to forget their sorrow. I was the only one out of step. Although the whole world showed sympathy and everyone came to help, I stood aloof, alone on my island, with the guilt of refusing to be pitied heavy on me. I wished to remember and grieve at the diminishing remains. I was pained at the loss of objects with which he was associated, desperately in search of evidence. All these were my own, personal, secret needs. No one was responsible for them.

I took the children out to the housing society's park, and I played with them for a while on the swings and slides. I showed them the fountain. We sat for some time on the grass. Then we walked up the road where an advertisement for a certain brand of orange squash was displayed. The younger boy loved the gigantic bottle on the advertisement hoarding. On our way back, we stopped before the temple and looked at the people inside chanting bhajans to the sound of cymbals. After that we helped a calf whose front legs were stuck in the tar that had been thrown on the way-side by workers repairing the road. The children were happy. I too, experienced a slight sense of relief. I even

bought a few paper kites for them, with spools of thread, from a vendor on the roadside. The liftman at the building smiled at me, at the children, at the kites in their hands. Perhaps he was thinking that the living had to live on.

3

When I went back to the office after my leave had expired, the first person who expressed his sympathy was my boss the sales manager. We met in the lift. When we got out of the lift he placed his hand on my shoulder and led me to his room. Taking off his coat and hanging it up, he sat down, changed the date of the calendar on his table, quickly surveyed his surroundings and then told me how much he grieved for me at my misfortune. After this, he expressed the hope that no matter what had happened, I would not forget that my life lay before me. Since the sales potential of the products I distributed for the company had been greatly increased by the announcement of the government's new import regulations he further hoped that I would make the fullest use of this opportunity; that I would devote greater attention and interest to my work, at least in order to forget my own emotional distress if not for the sake of my wife and children. Taking a file on which he wanted me to do a report I left the cabin.

Outside, the entire staff was waiting for me in order to know the details of the death and to express their sorrow.

I vented upon them the anger I could not show against the manager. 'Darkness cannot spread itself into lighted places, my friends. You will understand that only when your own eyes are closed. Sorrow and sympathy are two different things.' Either because they realised the truth of what I said or because they suddenly remembered the manager and his emphasis on discipline, they went back quickly, each to his own table, to think about their own families, their own lives and to immerse themselves in the effort of increasing the profits of the company.

So that was the problem, I said to myself as I opened the file which the manager had given me. I checked whether there was ink in my pen and started to prepare my report. Each one had his own life to live. His wife, his children. I kept the interests of the company in mind and made my report. For the sake of my wife, my children. I piled up catalogues and price lists, I committed to memory all the merits and statistics of a new model.

And yet, a week later, ignoring the advice of the manager, well aware that I would be late to the office, I turned again towards the crematory. After all, nothing can be achieved at the first attempt. Once, long ago, I had to make many trips to the Food Controller's office to get my ration card. Finally my wife had interfered and got it done through an acquaintance of a friend. As far as my walking to the office was concerned, she wanted it to go on endlessly. It was when I said I was going to the crematory that nobody ever said anything. When had I ever walked like this, entirely alone, like a bull under its yoke, unaware of anything else?

The clerk was in the shed, supervising a cremation. I waited on the verandah outside the office. The clerk's wife was scolding someone upstairs as she cleaned the floor. Or since both the children were playing downstairs she may not have been scolding anyone but only grumbling to herself. I stood on the verandah, reading the notices on the

long blackboard that hung on the wall. 'The Rules of the Crematory, drafted according to the orders of the Municipal Commissioner...' The Municipal Hindu Cremation Ground could be used by Hindus and those who wished to perform a cremation according to Hindu rites. In cases of unusual death, inquests and post-mortems should have been performed earlier. No cremation would be permitted without the doctor's certificate stating the cause of death....

It was my communist friend who had brought the doctor that day to write out the case report. The clerk at the crematory had taken it and placed it somewhere in the register kept on his table in the office. A sudden desire possessed me. I did not realise that an irrational impulse like this was quite out of place in a crematory. How ignorant I was of the rules of the burning ground, the security precautions there. No sooner had I set foot inside than the younger of the two children started screaming. Quietly playing in the courtyard so far, he now placed both his hands on his head and began at the same instant to scream at the top of his voice, exactly as he had done the last time when he had collided with me. The older one started to jump up and down. Within seconds, the clerk's wife who had been cleaning the floor upstairs, the clerk who had been near the pyre and a host of servants surrounded me. With one foot inside the room and one out, looking as scared as I was, to them I must have certainly looked a thief. The older child—it was then that I realised he was dumb—pointed a finger at me, trying to say something. I would have fainted again or perhaps had a heart attack. But to my surprise, it was the clerk who came once again to my rescue. Not only did he pacify the children and send away his wife and the servants, he even helped me to sit down on the chair inside. He gave me a glass of cold water from the earthen pot in the corner. I thanked him over and over again in a trembling voice. Not attempting to

draw up his lower lip, he smiled with his upper lip alone and asked, 'You've come for the death certificate, haven't you?'

He sat down himself, undid the top button of his shirt and started to fan himself with his handkerchief. 'What a rush, it's quite unusual. Everyday, there are ten, fifteen cases coming in.

'I hope there are no epidemics.' My heartbeats having returned to normal, I offered this civility in order to earn his goodwill.

'Oh no. It happens sometimes. No, respite, day or night. One cannot even go out. Look, about your certificate. Do you know, I have not even had time to go to the municipal office?'

'That means, then...' I was on the verge of tears.

'Don't worry.... It doesn't matter. 'I'll settle it all soon. It is only that I must find enough time to get out of here.'

'But you asked me to come today,' I nearly sobbed.

He smiled, that was all. The smile that touched only his upper lip. I tried to control myself.

As if to comfort me, he touched my hand with four fingers, lightly. Then glancing swiftly to the left and to the right he lowered his voice and said, 'Look here, friend, things get done only through influence and recommendation. There's no point in finding fault with people. Do you know how many thousands of cases go to the municipal death office every day? You should go over there if you can, and see for yourself one day. Only then will you understand. According to the rules, people have to go to the office themselves to get the death certificate. I thought I would try to get yours for you as a special case.'

'Thank you very much, thank you,' I said eagerly. I no longer felt dissatisfied that he had delayed the matter. The municipal death office was ten miles away. A place I had never seen, of which I knew nothing.

After thanking him, I had just risen to my feet and was about to leave when the clerk hit the table loudly with his fist as if he had discovered something and turned to me: 'What a man you are! Have you paid the fee for the death certificate? Did you even care to fill up the application form? It's amazing. The world is full of the strangest kinds of people!'

I sank into my chair, transfixed. There he sat, his lower lip trembling, looking at me as if to say, what kind of a man can this be.

Could he not have told me all this at the beginning? The application form, the registration fee, the difficulties in going to the municipal office, the wages for doing so.... It did not matter, I told myself. He was a busy man, he might have forgotten. Or he might have thought I knew all about this. After all, was I not a human being like everyone else? One who had lived all these years? One who was still alive? One who was destined to die one day? The fault was mine. Ignorance cannot be forgiven.

The cost of the application form, the registration fee, the fee for the death certificate—the clerk started calculating, adding up figures this way and that, counting on his fingers. Thrice he went wrong. The fourth time I helped him out. He gave me the answer at last—fifteen rupees. Drawing two lines beneath the figure, he leaned back, breathed deeply and said, 'You had better give me thirty rupees. Now today's date—all right, come again on the thirtieth.'

Fifteen rupees for the death certificate, fifteen rupees as bribe for the recommendation to get it stamped from the office. I did not object. It was not the amount I minded but the idea of calculating it in terms of rupees and paise. This was a matter of life and death to me. If I could not have it, of what use was money, of what use was life to me?

Having put the money into his pocket, he took out an

application form and gave it to me. When I had filled it he asked for the firewood vendor's receipt. I gave him that too. He took the receipt and holding between his thumb and forefinger turned it around, scrutinising it. He held it against the sunlight. He peered at it from near then read it from a distance. Finally he opened his register and compared what was written there with what was written on the application form and the receipt. The clerk paid the greatest attention to the verification of all facts to rule out the possibility of making mistakes. When he was satisfied he put all the papers on the open page of the register and placed a stone on top. Having finished, he wrote on a piece of paper that he had received thirty rupees, signed it, and held it out to me. 'Bring this when you come next.'

Gathering my courage, I asked, 'That receipt, could you please return it to me?'

His response was immediate: 'You do not need it.'

So that was that.

He had kept the doctor's report underneath a stone on the open page of the register in the same way that day. And it was not there any more. Tomorrow this receipt will also disappear.

I stood looking at the open page of the register. I thought, perhaps that is all that remains. The register. All that is placed within its pages disappears. Or everything converges at the point where a particular line and column meet. My eyes searched for that line and column and having found it, hung there. I read what was written there over and over again. Name—in capitals; Age: thirty-five years; Sex: male; Disease: lymphosarcoma; Date of death: a fateful date. It was ten days now since it happened. The sun had risen and set ten times. I and the clerk, and everyone else in the world had become ten days older. I had sold some of the company's products. Many trains had gone across the railroad crossing. The world had drawn a

little closer to another war...but he was still there. In the same condition that he was in ten days ago. Tens and hundreds of years would pass by but he would always be thirty-five years old. In the course of the voyage that time makes every human being is destined to remain a thirty-five years old or a sixty-year-old or a five-year-old at the point where a line and a column meet in the register of a crematory clerk. Was then life growth, and death the cessation of growth? Then, what existence did I, still growing, have? Was he not, being dead, more firmly established? I did not ask this of the crematory clerk. After all, he was only a crematory clerk. And I a human being; a man who lived now, who was destined to die one day.

When he banged the register shut in my face, I took the nameless, unsealed, undated receipt which was all that was left for me, put it in my pocket and turned away, taking good care not to collide against the children playing in the courtyard and knock them down.

On my way back, I put my questions to the old man who stood next to me in the crowd in the moving train, supporting and helping me, to whom I had to cling from time to time to keep myself from falling. 'Look,' I said, 'by the time the train reaches our station, how much we would have grown. We grow and change all our lives. We continually cease to be ourselves. We continually cease to exist. Thought of like that, ceasing to exist is not death but growth. Life. As for death, instead of ceasing to exist each of us becomes established as an unmoving and permanent truth. If you feel that those who are fixed as an unmoving truth have ceased to exist, it is not because they do not exist, on the contrary, it is because we ourselves are continually ceasing to exist. As we grow up, grow away, the man left on the way fades from our vision. Even if we are unwilling to forget, what value does memory have when we ourselves change from day to day, from minute

to minute into different persons, into thirty, sixty-year-olds? Man's ultimate existence seems to be converging to the point where the co-ordinates of the line and the column in the crematorium clerk's register meet. He becomes himself in death. And the only lasting proof of his existence is his death certificate.'

Cramped for space as he was, pointing his cigarette upward as a sports umpire points his pistol, bringing it down with difficulty from time to time to take a puff and blow out smoke, he listened attentively to everything I said and grunted in assent. He nodded his head as best he could in his posture. He promised whatever help he could in solving my problem. This excellent man, who was a librarian in one of the city's big libraries, held forth on the good fortune that had enabled him to meet me, invited me to see him at the library and tearing off a scrap of paper from his cigarette packet, held it up above his head and scrawled his telephone number on it for me. I felt relieved at having been able to express my bottled-up thoughts to someone. It was the first time I had spoken of my pain to another. And the first time someone had listened to me.

When one came to think of it, so many people in the world lead so many different kinds of lives. All claim to be living. Yet, whether they are those who observe philosophical precepts or are in pursuit of science or whether they simply love their wives and children and relatives and pass their time engaged in worldly activities, how many of them can agree that they are pursuing their path of life because they cannot do anything else? Only when we come face to face with a matter of life and death do we understand, even slightly, the meaning of sincerity. It is only then that we become aware of ourselves. Had it been on another occasion, even if he had been standing next to me supporting and helping me, I would not have thought of

speaking to an old man, a total stranger, nor would I have drawn so much comfort from our conversation.

4

I did my work in the office that day with more zeal, more seriousness than usual. I telephoned many people, and went to see some of them. I secured a small supply order. I made the acquaintance of the purchase officer of a firm that would be able to give me a big order. Having finished with all this, I got back to my office in the evening, wrote my diary, tidied my table and packed my bag. I was just about to leave, my mind full of a vague sense of satisfaction, when my communist friend came in smiling.

I welcomed him, made him sit down and offered him tea. We enquired about each other's domestic affairs. He said he had not come earlier because he had had a slight pain in his chest. We talked about illness in general, about medicines and their ineffectiveness. He told me that he did not believe that the ills of the world would ever be cured or that a good morrow would arrive through medicines or magic. It was only as he was leaving that he revealed the reason for his visit. He had arranged for a priest to perform the funeral rites and the immersion of the bones. He said he would bring the priest over to my house on Sunday morning, that I was not to worry about these matters at all.

'No, my friend, not that,' I said, unthinkingly, 'that's not right—please—'.

'What on earth are you saying?' He did not hide his surprise. 'Can you go on living with the past like this? How can you pave the way for the future without destroying the past?'

I told him that my problem was not to destroy the past or to create the future. 'Whatever remains...whatever exists ...if there is any...is there anything...look'—I stammered, then fell silent.

'Think of the future,' he said, his hand outstretched to stop me, 'Don't you have two children? Think of their future. How many exciting experiences the future holds. Unless one curtain falls another cannot rise. That which rots serves as manure for something to grow. This is the greatest philosophy. Did you think I really had any interest, or any faith, in the performance of these funeral rites?'

No, he had no interest, no faith in these rituals. No one had any interest or faith in them. Yet everyone seemed to be in a hurry to make me go through them, as if delay would make me miss a train. People came to shake me out of my dazed state, they made me carry the bier. The fire-wood vendor took the trouble to pick out the driest logs, the ones which would burn the quickest. My communist friend perspired in his effort to expedite the process. The clerk at the crematory had everything performed under his personal supervision and stayed till he was satisfied that the body had burnt completely. But all these people who observed the custom not because they had any interest or faith in the rituals but because they did their duty philo-sophically, did they know what they were annihilating? Did they realise what their action repudiated?

I did not try to say anything further. Whatever I said, however much I argued, I really had no other alternative except to do as he said. If it had been decided that

even those shattered, crushed bits of bones were to be floated away, I had to abide by that decision. He left only after he had finalised all the arrangements, even having calculated the fee to be given to the priest. In the end, I even thanked him for the interest and enthusiasm he was showing in the matter.

After all the efforts and gains the day had brought I returned home with a feeling of futility. The train was more crowded than usual. When I got down at the station, my legs ached. I yawned a couple of times. I nearly tripped over a stone and fell. Though there were already four persons in the lift the liftman took me in.

As soon as I reached home I gave my briefcase to my daughter and slumped on to the sofa. My wife was a little upset at the way I looked. I comforted her, 'It is nothing. Make me some tea.'

When she brought me the tea, I said, 'The communist said that he would bring a priest on Sunday. He said we had better immerse the bones in the sea.'

'That man is such a great help,' she commented, sitting down by me and stroking our son's head. 'He really takes care of everything, makes all arrangements—as if it is his own personal affair.'

I said, 'He's a communist.' She smiled as if what I said was only a jest and went away. Probably she did not understand what I meant.

At night standing on the balcony and looking out, I saw the fire blazing far away in the burial ground. The flames appeared alternately bright and dim through the louvres in the sides of the shed. This was something I had seen so many times. It used to force itself, unsought, on my vision whenever I stood on this eighth floor balcony. But I knew nothing in those days of the organisation, the management and rules of this small but complicated establishment; of the tension and fear and pain that filled it. I had thought

that the two-storeyed building that comprised the office and quarters of the crematory clerk was just a block of flats built by someone in an unsuitable place. How extra-ordinary they all were, how deeply hidden away in secrecy and wonder: the workers who toiled like machines, who were as disciplined as soldiers; the vendor who so carefully measured out not only wood, but everything else—bamboo, cloth, ghee; the register that made everything placed inside it disappear; the children who played in the courtyard for the sole purpose of spying on those who dared to enter it and crying out and their mother, who showered curses on anyone who so much as touched them. It was impossible for anyone to think of the place without trembling inwardly. Yet, once one was obliged to enter, one was forced to knock at the door over and over again, like a slave, knowing nothing but the burden of the yoke.

All our relatives and friends came for the funeral rites. My sister arrived on Saturday evening. Her husband's brother who had been a great friend of the deceased had taken two days' leave and come earlier. Having been on tour he had not been able to come at the time of the death. The children were happy when the house started to fill with people. My wife paid more attention to the cooking.

'Thank goodness this transfer has come at the right time,' said my sister's brother-in-law; an engineer by profession. 'It's a very busy place. One hopes that one can forget everything when immersed in work.'

His elder brother rebuked him, 'Your are always on the subject of work and transfers.'

'You have your families, your children, what do I have except this?'

My sister did not believe in funeral rites and rituals. 'What point is there in all this?' she said, 'we did whatever we could when he was alive. And yet, he withered away.

What is left after death? What purpose is served by watering the roots of a dried-up tree?'

Everyone asked the same question. What remained after death? Nothing.

Yet, everyone wore their dhoties in the prescribed fashion. They repeated what the priest said without believing in it. They performed everything with good grace and no interest whatsoever. Finally, going to the seaside, they immersed the crushed, broken bits of bones that had been tied up and put in an earthen vessel.

When it was all over I gave the priest his fee and sent him away. Saying that his wife would be waiting the communist hurried off. As he was leaving he invited me to his house and insisted until I accepted. Promising to follow, I saw the other relatives into the bus and began to walk on the beach alone. My feet sank into the sand. The crows gathered round me, squawking loudly. I had to shoo them away with my hand. Finally, looking sideways to the right and left to make sure that nobody was watching, I jumped swiftly into the sea and began to search.

When a wave came in I drank a lot of sea water. I watched disappointedly as each wave broke. I was wet from head to foot. My shirt and socks were filled with sand. I found nothing but stones and shells. A crab got hold of my finger and pinched it. I was conscious of disgust and pain. But I forgave the creature. Perhaps it was the destiny of a crab to be born a crab, to live like a crab, to claw at the hands of those who searched the sea. And that of a cockle to glide like a cockle. That of a crow to fly like a crow. My destiny was this. I got out of the water. I walked on, dripping. I drew further and further away from the crabs and the cockles and the crows. When I reached the tar road I shook off the water from my body, took off my shoes, wrung out my socks, put them on again and got into a bus.

When I got off the bus I did not feel like going home. I walked down the road and through the market looking for nothing in particular. At last I found it. At least I thought I found it. In front of a shop I saw the two children of the crematory clerk. The younger one who always placed his hands on his head and screamed and the older one, the dumb boy.

Coming to think of it, they were not children who looked sweet or who had the charm of the young. As far as I was concerned they evoked in me no pleasant feelings but only feelings of restrictions and limitations. And yet the sight of the children brought me a sense of relief.

The younger one recognized me. But he did not come to me when I called him. He turned away like a guard from a prisoner. When I patted him affectionately on the back he raised his hand and hit me. It hurt me severely. Without showing my disappointment, however, I bought some chocolate and balloons from the next shop. They accepted these gifts, though with suspicion. They ate the sweets and gave me the balloons to blow up. I walked with them right up to where the road turned off to the burning ground, blowing up the balloons one by one. Not only had the younger one started talking to me by then, he even gave me a smile when it was time to go our different ways. I smiled too.

The self-confidence that this smile and conversation brought me was no mean thing. I am not sure what would have taken place that day, if this had not come my way. I was just thankful that a day on which I had lost so much should end in this way. I waited for the next Sunday which would also be the thirtieth.

5

I woke early. I got up, did the day's shopping, bathed, had tea and set out. I bought some biscuits on the way. Leaving the railroad crossing and highway behind I reached the burning ground. No pyres were burning in the shed. It was a clear day.

The office downstairs was closed. With an ease born of familiarity I climbed the stairs. When they saw me both the children ran up and grabbed the biscuits. I took the liberty of patting them on their backs. They did not object. The clerk's wife, straightening herself from where she was cleaning the floor, wiped her hands on her saree, placed them on her hips and gazed lovingly at the children. With a look of approval for what she considered my sense of the fitness of things, she smiled at me.

She thanked me on their behalf. I told her it was not necessary, that I thought of them as my own children. We talked for a while about children in general, about their mischievous ways. Was it not because of children that people did not consider their family problems to be burdens? Was there a sorrow that could not be forgotten by looking on the face of a child? She stood with her hands on her hips, I with mine folded in front of me. Neither of us touched upon the unpleasant experience that I had endured twice because of these children.

The conversation finally arrived at a subject far more important to me than the children, her husband. But the

topic did not seem to interest her. 'He has gone to the municipal office,' she said, 'It will be very late when he returns.'

'What pressure of work! Some people have to slog so hard, I really admire their ability.' I did not voice my hopes.

'I know. However much I mop the floor, it never becomes clean.' She evidently thought I was talking about her. Abandoning her husband she moved on to the topic of herself. 'Smoke and soot all the time. My hands and feet feel as if they have been almost torn off with all the work I do.'

I agreed with her on that too: 'When will this state of affairs ever improve? What else can one say except that this is the human condition? Let us hope that things will get better. My friend says that a better tomorrow will come. He is a communist.'

'Yes, yes, that's what everyone says.' She laughed, an empty laugh. 'Listen, there's something that I can never understand, no matter how much I try to,' she continued, in a low tone, as if whispering into my ear. 'This talk of rest, repose; what does it mean?... Why does nothing ever become clean?'

I felt both pity and respect for her. She washed and wiped the floor every day from dawn to dusk. Her hands and legs had nearly been eroded with all the cleaning she did. And yet she was never able to see the floor perfectly clean and then rest.

'There's something I don't understand too,' I lowered my voice when I spoke. 'A man who was alive—a man who loved and laughed is suddenly not there any more. What does dying mean—and after death or even if it is being alive...or else, for all this—'

'Ha, ha, ha—' even before I finished my confused sentence she shook her head and started to laugh. Still laughing, she abandoned me and my question, crouched on her

haunches and began to clean the floor. In a second she was absorbed in her work. It seemed that she was not aware that a man stood there, his arms folded. I descended the stairs quietly and turned homewards.

I reached home with that monstrous laugh ringing in my ears. I did not hope for an answer to my questions. But once more I had been reminded that I had only myself to fall back on. There was no one else.

Hands crossed behind me, I walked with my head bent. Guess who opened the door when I knocked? My friend the chemist, and on his face was the smile of a priest about to listen to a convict's confession.

While waiting for me, he had established a firm friendship with my younger child. The paper boats and aeroplanes he had made for the boy lay scattered and torn all over the room. As for the child, he would not leave his side even for an instant. Abandoning the boy he came over to me. We shook hands and stood silent for a while like a convict and a priest. Then he asked me to excuse him for not having come earlier as he had promised. He praised my son's mischievous ways, his cleverness. He enquired about my health. I asked him about his business. The conversation continued.

'There was something in the newspaper about a new drug for cancer being manufactured from snake venom,' I said, 'The doctors say that cancer will be a curable disease in two or three years.' He did not reply. Paying no attention to his silence I continued, as if to myself.

'If only his illness had come two or three years later. For a couple of days he kept saying this. Everyone said I should not have given him the news item to read.'

The chemist sat staring as if he had not heard. His face grew pale. His lips trembled. His eyes glistened as if they were wet. He started to shake his head forcefully like a hysterical person, repeating, 'Poison, poison, everything is poison.'

I did not understand. It seemed we were drifting apart; as if an actor had suddenly left the stage to join the audience. Someone who sat far away from me and sympathised. Who knows, I might have lost him too, forever. He might have left me there to act my own part and gone away himself but my wife came in at that very moment to say that lunch was ready and invited him to eat with us, extending to him the civility that I had omitted to show.

'It is time for food now, no poisons please,' she smilingly countered, 'My God, what ideas you people have in your mind!'

Begging her to forgive him he accepted the invitation. He ate with relish, praising my wife's culinary skill.

We started talking again after lunch. I felt sleepy. I dozed off right there on the sofa while talking to him. When I woke up he was on the balcony playing with my child. I asked him to excuse my discourtesy. I described to him all the unpleasant experiences I had been obliged to endure in the office on account of my weakness and distress. He suggested some tonics that had just come on to the market. He undertook to bring them for me the next Sunday.

'I've often felt that a salesman's job does not suit you,' he said 'It doesn't matter, I've found a new job for you. When you want to change just let me know.'

I really felt happy. I thanked him. I promised to let him know when I wanted the job. He left, promising to come again the next Sunday.

6

The next day, I did not go to the crematory. Nor the day after. I had decided not to go for a few days. But on the third day when going to the office I found myself once again on the way to the burning ground.

The workers were cleaning up the platforms on which cremations had taken place the day before. A man sat cross-legged under the tap in front, chanting his prayers aloud while he bathed. Skirting the shed I made my way to the office.

Both the children were playing in the courtyard. I looked at their faces and smiled; they ignored me. The clerk's wife threw down a bucket of dirty water from upstairs. I moved aside just in time or it would have fallen on my head.

The clerk was scrutinising a page in the register. For a long time he took no notice of me as I stood beside him. Then closing the register suddenly with a bang he extended his hand mechanically towards me like a ticket collector on a railway platform, without even looking at me. Confused, I pulled the receipt out of my pocket and gave it to him. Holding the receipt in one hand he opened a file with the other. He then began to turn the pages starting with the bottom-most one. So he sat: the receipt in one hand, the other hand turning the pages. I kept standing patiently, briefcase in my hand. And so it continued, for a long while. I then began to comprehend that he was not looking for the death certificate or for anything related to my case.

Watching his action my hopes and anxiety began to turn into disappointment and fear. Hours passed. When my legs grew weary I sat down. He still ignored me. When he had turned the last page the clerk closed the file and pushed it away. He then ran his eyes rapidly over the receipt and gave it back to me. I wanted to cry but just managed not to.

'Have you brought the birth certificate?' he asked in an expressionless voice like the man at the railway counter who asks your destination before issuing a ticket.

'Whose?' The question escaped my lips.

He raised his hand and stared at me. His glasses slipped down and fixed themselves at a certain point, on his nose. His lower lip stopped trembling and hung down. It seemed as if the children playing in the courtyard also stood still. The motionlessness of a burning ground, where not even the ashes stir.

'How can I get the birth certificate now? You never told me that it would be needed. Not even once; before it... I did not know until this moment.'

'That means you have not read the application form. For God's sake, man, read what is written before you sign something. I feel ashamed to have to explain this to educated people like you. Do you realise that thanks to this error of yours I was reprimanded by the office superintendent?'

I had to listen to everything and suppress my own feelings. Helplessness made me feel weak and numb. The fault was mine for not having read the application form. No officer would forgive such a crime. But that was not the immediate problem. Even if I had read it, what could I have done? I did not have the birth certificate of the deceased with me. When he was born no one had dreamt that it would be needed after his death. And yet...if someone had just mentioned this even a moment before he had died.... Now

it was no longer possible, no doctor would issue one. How could they be sure that he had been alive? That he had been born? Even his dead body had turned to ashes. The charred, shattered bones had been cast into the sea.

'For God's sake,' I pleaded, 'Can't you do something without the birth certificate?'

'How can I do anything without the birth certificate? Should one not have proof of some sort? With people like you—'

'Proof? Did it not all take place before you? Did you not see everything with your own eyes? You were a witness, then there was the certificate of illness, the firewood vendor's....'

But no, even these things were not there any more. Everything had disappeared. All the remnants, all the certificates, all the receipts. I was just beginning to understand the foolishness of what I was saying. Leaving me to realise my own mistake he kept quiet.

When I stopped, he got up slowly and said, very calmly, 'Look man, there's no use talking. I'll make one more effort for your sake. I'll see the officer and make a request to him. There's nothing more I can do. Go away now. We'll think about it when you come next.'

This time he only mentioned a next time. He did not give me a day or a date. That was that then. I got up. I wiped my face with my handkerchief. Took up my briefcase. Once again I left the crematory.

I reached the office very late. The manager not only noticed the delay, he reprimanded me in front of everyone. He even threatened to sack me. I had been making a great effort these last few days. Disregarding physical exhaustion, ignoring mental strain and weakness. I had served the firm all these years with the same unselfishness. I had sung the praises of the company's products. I had explained to everyone how they were so economical and useful. And

yet it had got me nowhere. He spoke as if all my efforts, my sales strategies, my achievements, were useless. Knowing everything, he knew nothing at all, exactly like the crematory clerk... .

I was just beginning to realise that a salesman's job was not suited to me. The chemist had realised it long ago. That was why he had looked for a job for me. He knew nothing about my education, my interests. Yet, he knew of a job that suited me. Come when you find it necessary. When you are at the end of your endurance. What was the limit of that endurance? Whenever the deceased was asked whether he wanted to be given oxygen he used to say that it should be given only when he could hold out no longer. Wait, wait, or my self-confidence will be ruined. Yet, once he cried out suddenly in the middle of the night—bring it please, please bring me the oxygen... .

Forgetting all insults, forgiving everyone, depending solely upon the hope of being recognised, I took my briefcase and stepped out. I went to the purchase officer of a large firm, a man I had become acquainted with a few days ago and with whom my friendship had grown, whom I considered a promising contact.

The purchase officer shook my hands and welcomed me. He made enquiries about the directors of my company. He told me how he had met one of the directors a few days ago. He praised his intelligence. He spoke highly of his wife's beauty. I agreed with him on everything. I laughed at his jokes. But when he went into details about the last board meeting of his company and how they had taken a decision not to buy the products I distributed, I found it impossible to agree with him. Taking my briefcase I nodded my head and left without even saying goodbye.

When I came down into the street, I realised the extent of my foolishness. I felt uprooted, as if I was being buffeted by a strong whirlwind. In an instant of uncontrolled

madness, I had an impulse to throw away my case, cast off my tie, run to the burning ground and fall at the feet of the clerk. I have nothing, nothing at all, only you. You are the only reality, the constant, the permanent truth, the only philosophy. Scold me, call me an idiot, find fault with me, destroy me, burn me and so live on yourself, only you... .

But I did not do all this. I did not even place the briefcase on the ground. Though I was sweating profusely, my tie remained knotted around my neck. After many cars and buses and people had passed by, I took a firm decision, called a taxi and asked to be taken to the library where my friend the librarian worked.

The librarian listened attentively to everything I said. He wrinkled his already lined forehead a little more. He lighted a cigarette, and planting the hand that held it on the counter, pointed it upwards.

'Ha, him, just as I expected,' he said, 'Everyone in the course of time arrives at this point, at this dilemma.'

'I am really in a terrible entanglement. Just think, it is not only death that is the problem now, it is birth too. Life is the proof of having been born, death is the proof of life. How can it be proved that someone who died was ever born? How does one prove that he died too? Nothing can be taken for granted. Everything fades away even as you look: See, where I have arrived now, little by little. All I have now is a receipt without a name or a seal or a date, to the effect that someone took thirty rupees from someone else.'

'Such is the nature of all proof,' he said, lightly touching my shoulder, 'to change continually. To become other than what it was. And then to become yet something else in its place. The more you question, the more you get entangled. Come, come with me—'

He took my hand and led me in. I followed him through the passages where only a dim yellow light fell through

rows and rows of tall shelves. Passages filled with the odour of old books. Turning and twisting, occasionally going up to the books to dust them and to peer at their titles, we moved on. Sometimes he pulled a book out of a shelf then moved on again. When necessary, he brought the step ladder, climbed up and handed me some books. In a little while our hands were full. We returned to the counter with a number of thick, worn volumes.

Having laid them out, he hurriedly began to open them here and there, and to show me the paragraphs and lines that he had been looking for. Now and then, when he recollected something, he would scratch his head, run back to the shelves again and moving the stool or climbing the ladder, search for new volumes which he then brought back. After a while, the counter and table were filled with various books that had been opened and marked. Not being able to stay with each more than a short while, we read, searched each word greedily, getting exhausted in the process.

'Is everything here only about this?' I asked in astonishment.

'Every book in this library. All these authors that you see have written only about this. See, look here, this and this and this.' He pointed out many passages that he had underlined in pencil or marked in the margin and pushed them towards me. 'Read it—read about the different predicaments of each individual—the dilemma each faces.'

Rows and rows of shelves standing high, thousands and thousands of books growing old in the dim yellow light and fine dust. I looked at them with fear and pain. The records of those who had hurried hither and thither in search of death certificates. Sorrow, confusion, restlessness lay spread out in the pages of these volumes that were filled with underlined passages, with markings in the margin. These writers had been inspired by doubts like mine. They too had run helplessly to and fro. They too had sat and

sobbed, their elbows planted on the tables of crematory clerks, on the counters of librarians. Where had they all arrived? Had they got their proofs? Had the yokes on their necks ever been removed? Or, cutting through railroad crossings and highways, tramping till they were dropping with weariness, till they fell, had they all finally stretched themselves out before the crematory clerk for him to personally supervise that they were burnt till their skulls split?

'Didn't I tell you that almost everyone journeys this way, to this state?' The librarian put down the book he had in his hand meaningfully and continued, 'But all this does not mean that these people did not arrive anywhere themselves or that your own efforts are in vain. Read, understand, that is the meaning of this library. But the message of the library is not in any particular line or paragraph or book; it is in the books themselves. That books are being written. Their efforts are for them, yours for you. For each, his own kind of dilemma. You should not be discouraged.... Let everything change, be destroyed, disappear. You must somehow get out of your dilemma.'

He did not raise his voice or become emotional. Yet, when he pronounced the last word, his hand rose three or four inches above the table and fell down again.

Responding to the gentle sign of determination in that rising and falling hand, I descended the steps that ran along the whole length of the building. Thick pillars rose to the height of the building itself. There was no one except me on those wide steps. And the pillars were not made to bear any weight.

In the garden in front the gardener's lawn mower could be heard. One man pushed it from behind. Two pulled it in front. In between them the lawn mower ploughed channels of grass making the lawn even.

At home, the engineer was waiting to see me. He was going to his new place of work the next day by the evening

train. As I was late returning home, he said that he had feared he would have to leave without seeing me.

'Seeing and talking to one another, is that not all we have in this world? We are not even sure that the person one sees today will exist tomorrow,' he said.

'You're right. When you think about it, everything seems futile. And yet, has it not been said that one must fulfil one's destiny.' I rattled off a conventional maxim.

The engineer explained that he had always followed the same philosophy and that he believed that there was nothing greater than action. 'Action, karma, is the only way one can forget one's sorrows and survive the past.' He was therefore very happy to accept this transfer; though it would be difficult to get a house in this new place, and he was afraid the food there would aggravate his gastric disorder.

Get married quickly, I advised him. The householder's stage is one of the karmas in man's life. Quoting my manager, I described the relationship that existed between the rules of action and the needs of a worldly existence. My wife, who had arrived by this time with tea, agreed with me even though she had not fully heard what I had said.

'Can one just get hold of any girl and marry her?' he laughed. 'One has to get to know her, love her and then... .'

'That is true. But can one choose everything in life? Man has to accept much, endure much.'

As I said that my eyes met those of my wife. 'Men are all the same.' She took the cups and went away. Both of us smiled.

Still smiling, he shook hands and left. I got up and went to the balcony.

As if she had just been waiting for him to leave, my wife came running in and caught my hand. 'What has happened? I was so frightened, seeing your face.' She stroked my face

gently as I laid my head on her shoulder. Because of the strain and pressure and the weakness of my heart, I could not move for a long time. Afterwards, I told her of the insults I had been obliged to endure in the office, the uncertainty of my future, the dilemma I was facing, the incomprehensible behaviour of the crematory clerk.

'What is breaking me is mainly the fearful doubts, the awareness of futility that I have to face each time I return from the crematory. Do you remember what the deceased said to the doctor the day before he died? Doctor, for six days now I've been sitting with my legs crossed, unable to lie down or get up—is it this posture that is breaking my life? Somehow, it all keeps coming back to me.... To walk and walk and reach nowhere. There appears no way to undo this tangle.'

She would not have understood the predicament I was in. As for the possibility that I might lose my job, it had never entered her mind at all. My job was for her a reality as constant as our wedded state. But she knew that I grieved. My grief saddened her. I saw her eyes fill. She took off my tie, stroked my chest, pressed her face to it. Then entwining her arms around my neck, she said to me, smiling, her eyes brimming with tears, 'There are other ties too, ties that you would not want to get out of!' I kissed her smile. The salt of our tears mingled on our lips.

But all things considered, it had to be accepted that things were not really so discouraging although I still had no idea when I would get the death certificate from the municipal death office. I was being churned within by questions that continually took the place of sorrow, by sorrow that constantly took the place of questioning. I was aware that in the office people had changed towards me and I was becoming increasingly conscious with each day that passed that a salesman's job was not suited to me.

Yet, on those occasions when I felt most alone, I had my wife to grieve with me even when she did not comprehend my sorrow; to awaken me, to coax me, through communication, through contact; to remind me that this my visible self was my truth, my eternity. Though I did not agree with him in many ways, considering that all that happened was destined to be, I had my communist friend to help me to perform the necessary duties with grace. He had the same interest and zeal in my affairs as he would have in his own. Neighbours were still concerned about our domestic matters. I had the librarian, to whom I could go whenever I wished no matter how much it affected all his other work, to whom I could talk openly, seeking relief. Finally, there was the chemist who, knowing nothing of my education or experience; had found a job that would suit me. Truth burns in all of us like a funeral pyre. Fuel should be continually added to the fire so that one is not burnt away completely. And one must hold one's head high so the skull does not explode and shatter.

Just as it was not necessary to separate myself from my wife's lips, I did not turn away from the office either. It was true that many there had started to talk about me behind my back and on many occasions even in my hearing. They talked about the changes they thought had come about in my manner and behaviour. All this had come about because of the sales manager's wholly unnecessary rebukes the other day. Feigning not to hear anything, I worked at my own affairs. If I obtained orders, well and good. If I did not, it didn't matter, I did not worry much about anything. I decided that I would neither fear nor respect anyone too much. After all, this was only my job, it was not my whole life.

7

One evening, in the train on the way home from the office I suddenly thought of my communist friend. It was a long time since I'd seen him. His invitation still stood. No matter how far apart we were, I was sorry to think that I had forgotten this man whom I had come to know through death. Moreover, now that the bones had been washed away and the funeral rites performed nothing more could be destroyed. His house was three stations before mine. I got out there.

The communist stayed in the new residential area planned by the corporation, a little distance from the station. Long parallel roads, neat blocks of buildings. He had said that it was a long way off, that I would have to catch a bus. But I walked and reached there in less time then I expected. I turned once to the right as he had, said, then to the left and walked along the eighth road looking for the house with the bougainvillæa. There was a garden too along with the bougainvillæa. Social worker that he was, he had put up a swing, no doubt for the children in the neighbourhood since he had no children in the house.

A middle-aged woman, whom time had not robbed of good looks, opened the door halfway and stood there hesitating to ask me in. But once I told her my name and said that I was a friend of her husband's, she not only lost all her fears but repeatedly asked to be forgiven for having kept me waiting at the door. She asked me into a sitting

room decorated with clay dolls and carved brassware. She told me that her husband had often talked of me; that he had great esteem for my intelligence; that she was deeply grieved at my misfortune. 'Anyway whatever has happened has happened. Those who survive have to get along somehow,' I told her. Like everyone else in the world, she too had no doubts on that score. Even so, we kept telling each other, citing instances, how cruel fate is, how painful and intolerable death is.

One instance was of her sister's daughter, an eighteen-year old girl. Soon after her wedding a telegram came to inform her that her husband, who had promised to come on leave to take her back with him, had fallen into the boiler in his factory and died. She had not even looked her fill at the man whom she called husband. When he died she did not have his ashes. From the time she received the telegram till today, she had not been able to accept his death. Even now, ten years later, she believed that he was not dead, that he would come back. The three people who said they saw him fall could have been mistaken. Not even a single charred piece of bone had been produced as evidence by anyone after his death. I told her a story too. This was about a man who resembled someone who had died. This man impersonated the dead man and lived with his wife and family. Something I'd seen once in a film.

While we talked, she opened the door many times, looked at the road and returned each time with a frown, afraid that something might have happened to delay her husband's return. I told her that the chances of disaster are less than ever now. There is a general growth of nationalism, there is a talk of war and destructive activities are confined only to strikes. There was nothing to fear for her husband. She was very eager to talk about him. She spoke highly of his character and his abilities. She liked the way he smiled and spoke. More than

anything else, I sensed that the fact of his being alive intoxicated her.

The next time, her opening of the door coincided with her husband's entrance. Startled at first, she then pressed herself to him and either forgetting my presence or ignoring it, wound her arms around him and lost herself in a long kiss. When they separated, they stayed at the door for a while teasing each other and joking. When his eyes fell on me, my friend seemed pleasantly surprised. He rushed to meet me with outstretched hands and though he did not actually embrace me, he came very near it. Still standing, he asked me about my wife and children. He counselled me not to neglect their future. I told him how much I appreciated his close ties with his family even though as a social worker he had no selfish concerns.

They entertained me with coffee and various things to eat. After that, they opened the door to each room, the bath room, even the lavatory, to show me their house. They told me they had bought the house on an instalment plan. They invited me to examine a cup that he had won in his younger days for badminton, which they kept in the sitting-room. They read out an extract from a letter sent recently to the unit president by the Party Chairman, extolling my friend's skill in maintaining accounts, and replying to audit objections.

Finally, we settled on the sofa with the family album that dated from their wedding. His wife was not without regrets that the children had all gone away. But she loved her husband more than she loved any of them. She even hinted that she would not stay alive if anything happened to him. This brought her to the thought, which was almost and order to me, that I should consider it my duty as a friend to constantly advise him not to become too involved in Party activities. Without pausing to think, I took on this heavy responsibility. Yet, even as I took it on, my nerves

shuddered at a fearful image which crept obstinately into my mind—of the body of this man who sat talking before me, burning on one of the platforms in the asbestos shed of the crematory; of this middle-aged woman whose beauty was still undimmed, screaming over him, her hair all dishevelled, falling on him; of the crematory clerk watching till he was satisfied that the body of this living woman was burnt and her skull split and shattered.

I consoled her saying that he would not die an untimely death. But now, the responsibility of holding him back from death had fallen upon me. What manner of death would not be untimely for her? Their love which had not waned after all these years of marriage would have no occasion to decrease in the future. But time was slipping by; nothing remained for ever. They would have to accept the fact that all this—their mutual affection, their agreeable existence in their ownership house with its bathroom and lavatory, the good name he had earned through his chairman's approval—all this would be finally replaced by a void. The funeral pyre which was their birthright had been ignited within themselves. This fire had the power to burn not only his affection, his reputation but also his wife who thought so highly of him—it had the power to burn everything, leaving no trace, no evidence behind.

On my way back, I remembered what my wife had said. All these are tangles. It is only to lessen the intensity of their problems, their sorrow, that human beings approach one another, talk to each other. The love and contact in turn created new ties. My wife's tear-drenched smile troubled me. It is for my sake that she grieves. It is due to my existence that her tears are brightened by smiles. When she weeps for me it is my duty to add a smile to her tears.

Come to think of it, it was a long time since we had been out anywhere; since we had taken the children to a film or something. So, next Saturday, I took them to watch a

puppet show. The season had set in. I chose a holiday on which to set out shopping with my wife and we bought the woollen clothes that everyone needed. Indeed, I even took the family to a film in the evening.

In the midst of all this conditions in the office were also slowly changing. With no recommendation or extra effort, solely on merit, I secured a good government order. The manager called me to his room to express his approval.

When I started out to the burning ground early in the morning on a holiday, my spirits were high. I had the intention of meeting the crematory clerk and talking to him, of even going to see the municipal death officer in his house if need be. On the way I did not forget to buy biscuits for the children. The yoke was growing heavier. And the furrow deeper.

Unusually enough, I met the clerk at the gate of the cremation ground. A group of people were leaving after a cremation. He was on the point of turning away from the gate after having advised them to entrust everything to him now; to return, each to their own house, calmly, and to come the next day to collect the bones and two days later the death certificate. Seeing me, he smiled. I smiled too. Skirting the shed and turning towards the office, he bought a cigarette for himself and one for me from the firewood vendor's shop. By the time we had climbed the steps of the office, his wife had brought tea, a cup for him and a cup for me. Before I asked, she told me that the children had gone to the market. It seemed as if they had all been expecting me.

When I gave her the biscuits she inquired about my welfare displaying the familiarity of long acquaintance. Then, as if she had recollected something, she suddenly turned and went away without saying goodbye. Poor woman. The wet hem of her saree showed that she too had reached nowhere during this period of time. Anyway

where could she have reached and how? These were matters that could be understood without words.

I looked into the shed. Someone was being burnt there. The fire was in its last stages. The relatives had all gone away. Once the fire died down the workers too left. In the silence of the big shed the bones cracked all by themselves.

'Everything has been settled. Didn't I tell you, the officer is a kind man,' the clerk's voice awoke me. 'He has agreed that the rule about producing the birth certificate could be waived as a special case. We shall have to spend only ten rupees. It's not just that; think, what a heavy responsibility he is taking upon himself. He believes what you say just like that. In reality, who can say that such a man existed?'

He poked a finger into my stomach and laughed, like a man about to give false evidence. In addition to my sorrow and anger, I felt humiliated. There was a sudden constricting pain in my throat. But I sat there like a statue carved in stone, gazing at that man's face distorted by laughter. He took my hand and pressed it. He whispered in my ear. He looked at my face and winked as if I had arrived at a secret agreement with him to fabricate false evidence.

Last time he had only said that the officer had to be placated. Now he himself seemed to be expressing a doubt. His authority to deny is, it seems, indisputable. My capacity to oppose him is slowly being eroded. In any case, I am beginning to understand the foolishness of all opposition. The more he denies, the less I can catch up with him through opposition. My only way is not to offer opposition. Otherwise he will walk farther and farther away from me and my opposition will confine me to the spot where I am. Whatever be the relationship between us, can I allow it to be broken off like that? Ultimately, who do I have but him to help me? He may deny everything but I have none else. I fought down anger. I hid my shame. I endured insults.

In any case, could one say that the clerk was entirely wrong? The deceased had been dear to me. He was a reality

made of flesh and blood, someone who had laughed and loved, who had the capacity to think, to understand. But this reality was only for me and for others who knew him. In sixty years' time no one would be available to prove its truth, or even give evidence for the fact that there was such a man. What court, what system of philosophy, would consider a case without evidence? False evidence would have to be produced even to prove the truth.

The crematory clerk looked at me with a gentle smile as if he was watching an enjoyable film: the passing show of anger, shame, and humiliation on my face; my taut fingers trying to claw at the slippery table then lossening; my transformation into a tired sweating salesman. When he had looked his fill, he pushed his glasses up. He closed his parted lips. Then he started to speak: 'Do you know how many cremations take place in this burning ground? All five of our platforms are used at the same time during the monsoon. After one cremation, another in the same place. People bearing the biers wait in queues, places are reserved in advance. Do you see those bundles there?' He threw his hand in the direction of the shed with the resolute air of an orator. He allowed me a few minutes to look at the innumerable bundles hanging from the roof of the shed suspended from the iron rafters: new ones wrapped in white cloth, smoke-stained ones that were growing black, cobweb-covered ones. Then in a voice that reminded me of the librarian saying that the message of the library was not in any particular line, or paragraph, or book, but which was much louder, he continued: 'They are bones. Bones picked up by my workers from fires that have burnt themselves out. On busy days when the platforms have to be cleaned to make place for fresh cremations before the relatives come, they pick up the bones, tie them up in bundles and hang them up. They do not keep catalogues or case histories. When the relatives come a bundle is handed

over to them. Thus the son who comes to collect the bones of his dead father, decrepit and blind, goes back with those of a young wife dead in her first childbirth. Where are your proofs? Your documents? Your witnesses? Ha, ha, ha! What you celebrate as truth, my man, is something that cannot be proved. More unproven cases!'

His voice echoed through my brain like the wail of a siren. Fear raced through me like a speeding train. I shivered in fear. When the noise subsided, I found that I had risen from my chair and stood poised to run with one foot outside the door. The clerk was pulling me back by my left hand, putting a stop to my movements. I was suddenly aware of my surroundings. I drew back the foot that I had put forward. I returned and sat down on the chair. Unconsciously, my hand started to grope in my pocket in search of the receipt for thirty rupees that he had given me the last time. He had not asked for it. I was beginning to understand a lot of things without asking or being told.

Even before I held it out the clerk snatched the receipt from my hand together with the ten-rupee note that I had taken out. Placing the receipt and the money in his pocket, he wrote out a new receipt for me. A receipt, without a name or seal or date, to the effect that someone had taken ten rupees from someone else. 'Bring this when you come next.'

Then I saw the clerk's face become expressionless once more and his lips part. I knew the significance of this. The fire in the shed had died down. Upstairs, there was the sound of dirty water splashing. I got up quickly. As I started to descend the steps the children, who had gone to the market, came back. The younger one, colliding with me as he ran indoors, fell down. Before his mother could turn her shower of abuse onto me, I ran out and got away.

8

I did not go to see the municipal death officer as I had planned to do earlier. I only wanted to reach home straight away and to talk about it, if possible, to my wife. My fate had been more or less decided upon. The door had been shut upon my future. All my efforts were meaningless. But was it correct to say that? Would I not present myself again before the crematory clerk? Would I not go to the library? Did I not have a receipt for ten rupees with me?

The municipal workers had started excavating in order to instal traffic lights at the highway crossing. Pits and holes and crowds. Paying no attention, I walked on. A train passed behind me as soon as I crossed the first railway line at the level crossing. Before I had set foot on the second line, another one passed in front of me from the opposite direction. I crossed the third and fourth lines at a run. When I reached the other side, the watchman at the level crossing caught hold of me by the back by my collar and stopped me. Not taking his hand off my collar, he shouted at me, calling me madman, drunkard, beast. Actually, if I had been trapped under the train, would he or the driver of the train have been held responsible? No one in the world can be held responsible if one is crushed under a moving train. And yet the man shouted at me. If by chance or by design I had died, no one would have found fault with me. They would not have called me a madman or a drunkard. I was being held responsible only because I had not died. Not for death itself. For death destroys not only the dead man,

not only the reason for his death but even the proof that he existed, leaving no visible traces behind.

Everyone's death was like that. Mine as well as that of the deceased. Each one fell into the boiler and died in such a way that not even the bones were left behind to be tied up in a bundle. Or, like the hero of the film, he brings an impostor to prove that such a man lived once. In the end there is only the silver screen for everyone. The silver screen, a white shroud, with not a scratch on it. No court questions death. Death has the last word even in a court.

The lift was not working. I climbed the eight floors supporting my knees with my hands. The stairs effectively braked the speed of my movement which the watchman at the railway crossing had restricted. I reached home panting, tired, bathed in sweat, like a dog that has been chased and stoned. My wife was terribly distressed when she saw the state I was in. She placed her hand on my forehead and switched on the fan which stood idle now that the cold season had begun. Making me lie back on the sofa, she went in and brought me many kinds of pills and ointments. I did not venture to contradict her assumption that I was ill, being too lazy to explain things to her, knowing that there was no point anyway in explaining. I obeyed her. I swallowed the pills she gave me. I allowed her to rub the ointments on my forehead and back.

She did not ask whether I had obtained the death certificate or how far I had progressed in my efforts to get it. She too had stopped talking about these things. I was, for her, a reality not to be questioned, a reality that lay beyond doubts, beyond caprice, beyond sorrow and misfortune, beyond death itself. And no wonder I was the foundation of her existence, the creator of her children. Physically we might have a partnership but I remained for her a rock as firm as God. I was truth. Eternity.

After lunch, we sat down to tidy the cupboards and

boxes, which had become untidy through long neglect. What a lot of things there are to be done in a house. By nature I was a person who took a great interest in maintaining order and following a routine in his daily life. We talked about the period of our honeymoon, which was a period without order and routine. Referring to some happy incident which had occurred at that time, my wife teased me. I kept pulling out things from .the cupboard and shelves, laughing at nothing in particular.

While I was happily sorting out things my hands suddenly came upon a big yellow envelope. It was one of the X-rays taken during the last days of the deceased. I paused hesitantly for a moment. Making up my mind, I distracted my wife's attention and instead of taking out the envelope thrust it under a saree. Then sending her to fetch a glass of water, I immediately put it into my briefcase.

The next day, after finishing a few chores in the office, I told the manager that I was going out on work. I visited a couple of offices and enquired about their requirements. I described to them the merits of our products. Then I went to a stationery shop and bought a red chinagraph pencil. Going into a restaurant, I ordered tea. While drinking it I opened my briefcase and took out the X-ray. Moistening my handkerchief in the tea I rubbed out the date written at the bottom of the film and entered the date of the previous day with my own pencil. Putting the X-ray carefully back into my briefcase I left the restaurant.

It was a sunny winter day. The street radiated life. Vehicles and people. Men and women. Joy and fulfilment. I stood for a little while breathing it in. Then I walked down the street reading the signboards. I entered the first radiological clinic I saw. Taking out the X-ray from the envelope, I gave it to the radiologist and sat down quietly.

The radiologist ran his eyes over the film and then looked at me. He looked at the film again, then at my face

once more. When he had done this a few times, his face fell. His smile faded. He managed to smile again with an effort and then felt sorry that he had smiled. Finally, abandoning this chain of action, the physician in him fixed the film to a frame hanging on the wall. He pressed a switch that lit up the film from behind. Two white-shadowed lungs clearly took shape before us like a picture.

He helped me to get up from my chair and lie down on a mattress. He stood over me, an all-powerful physician, as I lay flat on the bed. He pressed my chest and abdomen. His fingers dug into my neck and armpit, beneath my ribs and into my groin. He questioned me about my rate of respiration and cough. He wanted to know where it hurt me, how weak I felt, whether I had any fever. He helped me to get up and sit in the chair again. Taking a long pointer, he indicated the white shadows in the X-ray and explained what they were. The left lung was almost full. The presence of secondaries had to be considered. It was a pity that there had been so much delay. To the cancer hospital, immediately....

My eyes were riveted to the picture, radiant with light, which remained an undeniable reality before me, before the whole world. Everything in the universe that was not that picture, all awareness that was not the radiologist's voice, became separate from me. And then the picture itself started growing dimmer by degrees. Reality took on the shape of darkness. The radiologist's words ran into each other. His speech became sound, like the indistinct hum of a wind blowing in from afar. After a while that too ceased. Sinking downwards, it merged into silence. I began to be aware of myself as a slight movement within that darkness and silence. A slight but restive movement. I fought darkness and silence with movement. A soft rustle came alive within me. I grew warm. I felt my bones grow and pierce me. The straining of muscle. The warmth of

blood. The hurricane in the mind. The rustle, the ache, the intoxication of growing in every limb. Intoxication became thirst. Thirst became restlessness. I was becoming myself. I grew within myself, I filled myself, I throbbed under pressure. I was exhausted with my own weight and pressure. My lungs gasped, muscles strained, clawing aches twisted me where I sat. I stretched out my aching limbs for something, I did not know what. Shoulders hunched together in a stoop, suffocation making the eyes bulge, the neck grew longer, longer. Perspiration, limbs turning cold darkness, silence, darkness-silence, again darkn... . I pressed my face to the radiologist's table and sobbed wildly.

I discovered an extraordinary relief and satisfaction in this pain and helplessness. I was astonished too for the reality which caressed me was not unknown to me. The reality that had been born in me, which growing, filling, throbbing, had attempted to push me out, that was I myself; I recognised it for at least a moment.

The radiologist did not try to stop my outburst. Nor did he attempt to console me. He sat in his chair with his head bent, leaving me to go my way as if I was a creature doomed to weep and die. But when, after a few minutes, I wiped my eyes, took up my briefcase and rose again in my role of a salesman, he seemed to recognise me. He shook my hand. He patted me on my back. He wished me good luck. I thanked him for his good wishes.

When I came out, I clapped my hands, hailed the first taxi I saw and got in. When the taxi driver asked twice and thrice where I was going, I lost my temper for no reason. 'Don't you know? To the library', I told him.

The librarian smiled, lit a cigarette and welcomed me. He opened the counter and led me in. He seated me in the easy chair in which he relaxed when he was free.

We had not met for a long time. We had not even telephoned each other. I had wandered alone in the city of my

sorrow swinging my briefcase, while he worked in his library. Though there was such a close relationship between us, though we understood each other as no one else in the world did, this was our plight, or rather our destiny. This separation was nothing to complain about. We agreed with each other that we had to sort out our own tangles.

I talked to him about my predicament. He was my only court of appeal. The only one who would listen to my argument; the only one who could understand me. And yet he had no right to pass judgement on me.

'I used to think that it was enough to go on adding fuel so that the fire does not die down,' I said, 'but now I feel that I am myself the pyre that blazes within me. This pyre gathers me into its embrace, trying to devour me completely, leaving nothing behind. It is my birthright, this pyre, it is I. My growth is fuel for me. My warmth is the fire. The more I grow, the more I burn. The more I burn, the more I grow. As time goes on growth becomes a burden to me. My shoulders begin to stoop with its weight. My neck grows longer. My flesh burns. My bones crack. At that point, I and my pyre meet each other at last. I end in myself... .'

Even when I had stopped the librarian continued to look at me as if I had not finished. Or perhaps he did not know that I had moved from speech to thought. I wonder whether he heard the swish of waves within me, as he had heard my voice. At last, when he spoke, his voice seemed to have been touched by these waves. 'Yes, you are the fire. And you are the fuel too. The opposite of growth is not destruction but the absence of growth. So also, the opposite of destruction is the absence of destruction. Since the absence of growth and the absence of destruction are one and the same, growth and destruction, which are opposites of the absence of growth and the absence of destruction, also become one. Fuel and fire... . You cannot avoid growing. You cannot avoid being yourself; you cannot

avoid confronting the truth within you. And when you confront it, you cannot avoid being destroyed. Death is the nature of each living thing, not its destiny... .'

I took up from where he had left off—'Does that not mean then that death is not the occasion of growth but its fulfilment? My life is the heat that burns within. When I am burnt out I become cold and lifeless. Death is the last word. There is nothing beyond that...no human being, no court can go beyond it to investigate further... .'

There was silence. Each of us dived separately into our common deluge.

Placing his elbows on the table, he leaned forward. He lit a cigarette. He took up a pencil and fiddled with it. Putting it down, he continued to smoke.

I fixed my gaze on the lighted tip of his cigarette and the pointed pencil. Then I looked at the rows and rows of shelves. Rooms filled with yellow light, old books, steps that were longer than necessary, pillars that bore no weight, the sound of the lawn mower... .

When we surfaced at last and saw each other again, I asked, 'If nothing remains, what am I searching for?....'

'The death certificate,' the librarian's response was prompt. 'You cannot avoid death. Nor does it leave anything behind. No proofs. No reasons. What remains then? The death certificate, only the death certificate!'

I could not but agree with him. That was our unwritten agreement. The crime that bound me to my court. The crime that brooked no judgement. The crime that was also the judgement.

We attempted to look at old things in the light of new developments and to evaluate old circumstances from a new point of veiw. We pulled out innumerable heavy books; buried our heads in their pages with greed and expectation. We searched, we thought. Turned over pages again. Voiced our doubts to each other. Deliberated. Argued. Agreed.

Disagreed. Reached the point of despair, of helplessness. Shook ourselves and went at it again. We grew exhausted. I do not know how long we spent doing this. Though we did not reach anywhere, we did not regret the time thus spent. Was it not a relief simply to have codified things in some way? Even if they had not been, since this was a question of life and death for me, could I afford to relax my efforts? Just a moment's pause, and justice will falter, fall asleep. The case will be written off. One should never stop arguing, even if there is no evidence. I have to go on, taking care not to allow things to sever their connections, not to lose the thread.

I dived into life with this determination. At the office, I tried to win the manager's confidence by paying attention to my work. When free I went to see my communist friend. Listened to him talk about the exciting events that were going to take place in the future. Relieved his wife's anxieties. Visited the chemist's shop to talk to him whenever I had to buy medicines or when I passed that way. In my leisure time, I called the children to me and helped them with their lessons. Went to the market. Spoke amiably to my wife. On occasions when I felt that I had no peace of mind, I changed the date on the X-ray and took it to the clinic of another radiologist. Writhed and wept in the pain and helplessness held within the embrace of that reality; the picture illuminated by the light behind it.

During this time I went twice to the burning ground. The first time, the clerk said that the death certificate had been sent up to the officer for his signature, that the officer was on leave for a couple of days with a cold, and that he would obtain the certificate as soon as he was back. The next time I went, the clerk had gone out. His wife welcomed me smilingly, offered me tea and complained to me about her endless toil, her importunate doubts. She did not understand when I quoted the old adage about the dhobi not

being able to finish all his washing before setting out to Banaras. Afraid that she would think I was mocking her, I descended the stairs at once and went home.

9

The next Sunday, I went with my family to visit my sister. On the way, my wife remarked that even close relatives met each other so rarely though they lived in the same city. She repeated the remark when we arrived there. It was her nature to find ideas like that for every occasion. She did not remember the fact that one of us would never be seen any more.

At their house we talked for a long time about the hot weather and the cold season that was coming to an end. We expressed concern over each other's health. My brother-in-law opened a bottle of Scotch that he had bought for Christmas, but had not opened. Over it, we became immersed in the discussion of various world events.

My sister brought us fried prawns in tomato sauce, my favourite dish since childhood. She still makes it whenever I go there. She and my wife wandered off to the kitchen. The children played outside. My brother-in-law and I sat in the drawing-room, arguing about the possibility of war.

In the evening both of them came to the station to see us off. They bought toys for our children at a shop on the way. When the train left the platform my wife said, 'What

do childless people have? I wonder how they even exist. Did you see your sister wipe her tears when we got into the train?'

'Why do we have children?' I asked as if to myself, 'Each plant grows, flowers, bears fruit and is destroyed. Each fruit contains within it the seed of death.' I don't think she understood. I did not hazard an explanation either.

Soon after that day I caught typhoid and lay in bed for several days. At first the attack was mild. I did not know, I thought a day's rest would be enough but the attack became serious.

Once, during those last days when he had reached the limit of his endurance, the deceased had said that health was freedom. Disease takes away not only the liberty to endure pain but even the liberty to understand it. Perhaps death takes away that liberty completely. The liberty to feel the aches and pains, to be tied to the stake of life, to feel the tightening of the noose round one's neck. The inability to rise from it ties us to our own pyre where fuel and fire become one.

As for me, death was unfamiliar. When I lay on my bed growing weak with pain and weariness, I did not imagine that the people standing around my body would go home after my death to eat, and sit in their drawing rooms and say, 'What remains after death—nothing', or 'Those who survive must go on somehow.' On the contrary, my doubts and hopes were centred on the death certificate that I believed would be waiting for me on the crematory clerk's table, complete with the officer's signature. In my more helpless moments, I even thought of the sorrow and fear of my endless trips to the crematory with a kind of tenderness. Was my sorrow my support? My well-being? Was it my liberator, my inducement to shake myself free from the stake? Was it my crime, my trial, the absence of a sentence the sentence that decreed that I could not be sentenced?

At this time the librarian, my only court of appeal, was not there to analyse my predicament, to propel me forward without letting me break any ties or sever any connections. My communist friend was not there either to destroy what was broken or to tell me of the exciting future. I could not face his family and offer them a fraudulent sense of satisfaction. I could not stand in front of the blazing pyre and hold up that which was not there simply to give relief. I had my wife to take care of me. But I was her God, eternal and true. Her service was like a prayer to God for God's own health.

One person who did bring me comfort was my friend the chemist, who came to see me sometimes. Whenever he came he asked to be forgiven for having come late, for not having come on the promised day. He promised to send me some drug that would be good for me. 'There are no limits to the research being done in the science of medicine. Every day some new drug comes out. Each one better than the one before.' Chuckling unnecessarily, like a priest before a convict, he said, 'There is no end to all this.'

When I was bedridden, I had placed a vertebra on my table in such a way that I could always see it. I had picked it up long ago from a burial ground. A vertebra from the lumbar portions of the spinal column. Its arms, the stumps of stunted ribs, looked like worn-out wings. In the middle, the gaping hole of the vertebral foramen, it looked like a strange bird that had just landed from somewhere in space. I saw the distances the bird had covered behind the stunted wings that it had worn out by flying. I saw the time that had passed through its body which had been hollowed by continual breathing. And yet, it seemed as if it would rise from my table any moment and fly away. From where I lay was forced to look at it all the time.

After I recovered, the first place I went to was the crematory. I felt weak and dizzy as I walked, but I did not

really mind. Holding open the umbrella that my wife had insisted I take, I walked on. More than sorrow, more than fear, I felt joy at finding myself once more on the way to the burning ground after so many days. This was my yoke and my destiny, my path and my nourishment. When I crossed the railroad crossing after having allowed the trains to go past, when I cut across the crowded highway and entered the small street, I felt at ease, unworried, like a creature on the path of its karma. I could have walked blindfolded.

The burning ground lay peaceful; no pyres were burning. The office and quarters were quiet too. The children were not in the courtyard. There was no sound from upstairs of the floor being washed. Even the workers were not to be seen. It looked as if each had finished his work and had gone to rest. Touching the receipt for ten rupees that lay in my pocket, I went in through the open door of the office.

An old man whom I had never seen before sat leaning back in the clerk's chair. His mouth wide open, fast asleep. On the shining bald head, the scanty remaining hairs, even the eyebrows, were grey. The skin of his face and neck and hands hung down as if it had been liberated from his flesh. The register was in front of him, the file on his left. By his side was the second chair. The bench in the corner. The water pot. I could not understand it. Even my inability to understand had ceased to astonish me. I went near him and asked twice; once softly and then loudly, 'Where is the clerk?' 'Where is the clerk?' He only moved his head to a slightly more comfortable position; he did not wake up. I stood there uncertainly, coughing unnecessarily, clearing my throat and moving the chair. All of a sudden, I saw spittle forming at the slanted corner of the old man's lips, on the point of dribbling down. I had an intolerable feeling of nausea. I had to prevent it from dribbling down. Since there was nothing else to be done, I grasped the

shoulders of the old man and started to shake him violently. The old man woke up startled and sucked in his spittle. And then, even though he had not woken up properly, he asked the question that seemed to have become automatic with long-established habit, 'Hm, what do you want?'

The thought that all these long wearisome journeys, these efforts, investigations, deliberations; these few months of my life that I had guarded carefully from being burnt away by sorrow; this disease that had taken me to the border of limitless despair; had finally brought me back to the first day when I had climbed these steps with the firewood vendor's receipt, weakened me from head to foot. The world had still not understood what I needed.

When he saw me that day the crematory clerk had been angry. This old man was angry too, that I had shaken him awake. But once he turned his attention to making the blood course through his left hand and foot which had grown cramped through his having slept a long time in an uncomfortable position on the chair, he forgot all about it. Though he had asked a question he did not demand an answer and ignoring me, he rubbed his hands and legs for five long minutes. Only when his limbs had warmed up and the blood started to course through them did he turn to me.

I asked my question again, 'Where's the clerk?'

And he, his, 'What do you want?'

When I realised that this conversation would take us nowhere and that he did not want to reach anywhere, I surrendered. I informed him that I had come for the death certificate and that I was sure the crematory clerk had kept it ready for me.

The old man yawned. Then looking elsewhere, he extended his hand, that had been on the table, towards me. Now knowing why, I stood idiotically looking at that hand with its raised veins, its hanging skin. He began to doze off

again, in the same position. When his head fell forward, he woke up with a jerk and asked once more, 'Where?'

'I don't have it; the clerk has got it,' I said, a little angrily.

'I am the clerk here.' This time he was wide awake, 'What do you want?'

'Then, then...where is *he*?' I stammered.

'I am the clerk here now. Which means that the other person is not here. You may assume that he is transferred if you like. More than that you do not need to know.'

I sank down onto the chair.

'What do I do now,' I said, as if to myself.

Perhaps to chase his drowsiness away, he stood up.

'I do not have time to argue with you. I have more work than I can manage to do.' As if trying to find that non-existent work, he looked searchingly to the left and right, at the register on the table and outside at the burning ground. Finding nothing, he turned to me again, 'If it is a death certificate that you want give me the receipt for the fire-wood.'

'I had...I had—' How much I had lost during those days when I lay imprisoned in my bed staring at the vertebra.

From my pocket, I took out the receipt for ten rupees that the old clerk had given me, the receipt without a name or seal or date, and held it out. 'I have only this with me. He had told me that this would be enough. He said that the papers had been handed over to the officer in the death office, that they would be signed and returned at once. For pity's sake, please look at the register and the file. He must surely have kept it somewhere there.' I told him both our names, mine and the dead man's.

Without searching for anything anywhere, without taking the receipt that I held out, he said, 'It is the receipt for the firewood that I require, for the firewood.'

'I gave him the receipt for the firewood. This is the

receipt for the money he took. Towards the expenses for the certificate. Look, his signature is here.'

A crooked smile blossomed from the side of his lips. 'I cannot identify his signature.'

'You cannot identify it! Won't it be on one of the papers here? Surely, he must have handed over the old cases to you. Surely, he must have spoken of me. He knew me very well. What a good man he was!'·

'He did not tell me anything, neither did I see him.'

He made it clear to me that the old clerk had left even before he had arrived, his transfer orders having been very sudden; that he had taken charge by himself; and that therefore he was not responsible for the tasks the old clerk had left incomplete or for the receipts he had given. He was not a witness for anyone who had died before he came. He would not say that they had died or not died; that they had lived or not lived. He neither believed nor disbelieved anyone. He simply did not take such things into cognisance, that was all. 'I do not know of such a clerk,' he said emphatically. 'I have no obligation whatsoever towards him.'

What he said was sufficient to close all doors and thrust me out forever from the crematory. Not only the existence of the deceased, but even that of the crematory clerk was now being questioned. Because I felt so helpless and impotent I pleaded again, like a fool.

'How can you say that there was no such clerk?' I said, 'Even if the father dies before his son's birth, does the son doubt that he had a father?'

'Comparisons are unnecessary.' His reply was curt and harsh.

The new clerk pushed away the receipt which I was still holding out and walked off. He began to spread out a sheet that had been rolled up and kept on the bench in the corner.

I had nothing more to ask, or say, or listen to. The clerk was getting ready to go to sleep. Almost unconsciously, I appealed to the pyre within me. If only everything would end here...this crime, this evidence, this argument, this sentence, everything...everything...enough, for all time.

The clerk spread out his sheet and placed his pillow at one end of it. Then he drank some water from the pot. He came back and sat on the sheet again.

'Please do me a favour. I won't ask for anything again,' I pleaded once more, 'Where has that clerk been transferred? I'll go and see him. He would not have forgotten me. He will never forsake me.'

'Go and inquire at the municipal death office.' Saying this, he stretched himself out on the bench. He yawned with his hands behind his head.

I thanked the old man and praised the large-heartedness and sympathy that he had shown me. He pretended not to have heard me. When I reached the door, he merely called out from where he lay, 'Please close that door.'

This was my first journey out-of-doors after a long illness. And what a journey it was. I walked alone under the hot sun. Between the road junction and the level crossing I felt giddy. I sat on the roadside for a while, leaning against the lamp-post. Then I got up and walked on again. 'The message of this library is not in a particular line or paragraph or book...' I thought of the librarian's words. High shelves standing in rows in the dim yellow light. The odour of old books. Bundles of bones hanging from the rafters and purlins of the shed in the burning ground. Each one takes a bundle and goes away unquestioningly. New crematory clerks come...people fall into boilers and die...a silver screen where the hero had met his death...once again I was going to be a madman and a drunkard in the eyes of the watchman at the level crossing. What a life, this life of mine.

10

My wife, upset on seeing my face, scolded me for not taking care of my health. How many times she had been seeing me thus; weary, on the verge of a collapse. She must have begun to doubt the permanency of this rock. I did not answer her. I acknowledged my fault. She sent word to the chemist. He sent me some pills, together with a note saying he would follow. But he did not come. Taking my wife's advice, I rested the whole day. I slept in the afternoon. At night, she pressed her face to me and wept. 'When will my husband ever learn to live... .' I consoled her—I shall live, I *will* live... .

11

But however simple you want to make your life, can it ever be without obstacles? Even those fortunate rational beings, who believe that their wishes are the same as their selves,

those who ignore all signs, evidence, all philosophical maxims, they too will admit that life is not an easy matter.

It was with innumerable doubts and suspicions that I got up the next morning, boarded an earlier train than usual and arrived at the office. You do not know how uncertain a salesman's life is. Often he does not understand when people intone the maxim that this uncertainty too is a kind of life. For here too, existence is always incumbent upon proof.

The Manager did not call me to his room to express his sympathy for my illness as he had done when the death took place. His contention too was like that of the watchman at the level crossing for whom I was guilty as long as the train did not run over me. The bill relating to the government supply orders that had been considered such a great boon had not yet been passed.

While I had been gazing at the vertebra an unpleasant development had occurred. Of the machines we had supplied, one-third had been rejected as substandard. Moreover, they even seemed to be thinking of blacklisting the company. I tried to explain that this was an example of how a supply order secured with difficulty by the salesman was ruined by the engineers. But the Manager did not accept my explanation. His line of argument was that as far as a salesman was concerned, the merits or drawbacks of the products was not the question; that if I had been smart I would have made them accept everything; that I had no interest in the company's affairs and that I had been taking too many days off. He was not willing to listen to a single word about my illness. He did not want to see the doctor's certificate—anyhow what certificate?

At first I felt like going straight to the library. But the critical situation I found myself in obliged me to go and see the purchase officer in the government office who had given me the order. I had to try and make an appeal to him. If it

became necessary I was even ready to offer him something. Considering that proof would be acceptable only as long as things were satisfactory, why should means be considered more important than ends?

Just as I had taken my briefcase and stepped out I was called back. A telephone call from the hospital. My communist friend was in the hospital with a heart attack! I froze as if I had suddenly seen the body of a murdered man. Desire was one thing, necessity another, destiny something else again. On seeing my open mouth, my bulging eyes and the sweat that started to drench my body the office peon brought me a glass of water and went away without saying a word. Everyone's reaction to my misfortune is like that now. An unemotional, mechanical fulfilment of duty. Compassion, sympathy, have all ceased to function. Everything has been reduced to salesmanship, to smiling without a smile. Basically we were all mere salesmen. Our colleagues, like our superiors, were not prepared to listen to misfortunes like mine, nor, if they listened, did they have the capacity to understand. Only as long as we sang the praises of our unattainable, impermanent, flimsy products would the manager understand us or we understand one another.... I had thought of greasing the purchase officer's palm, that did not happen. Lying to the manager that I was going to see the purchase officer, I got out of the office.

Considering the distance to the hospital the taxi driver took me there very quickly. They know short cuts unknown to us. When I got to the building I stood timidly outside for a little while, not quite sure how to get in. The way to the ward for heart patients was a confusing maze of stairs, passages, anterooms and verandahs. I lost my way when I had gone half the distance. After that, depending only on people's instructions, I moved on.

I did not see a single sign of illness on my friend's face. A man who usually did everything standing up was lying

down, that was all. Or perhaps that very act of lying down constituted his illness. What made him himself was his capacity to stand. The stance that intoxicated his wife. Had some god cursed him that he might become a dead body if he lay down? Though he looked after only correspondence and accounts, he had not realised that his work that ultimately strengthened the foundations of a party working for revolution, was weakening him day by day, moving him from a standing position into a sitting one, from a sitting position to a supine one. Probably, when he came home from the office every evening, his wife's loving complaints and long kisses had helped him to ignore the change happening in himself. Not the radiance of tomorrow but the flames of the past were the pyre that awaited him. Death had already sown its seed in him.

As soon as he saw me he entrusted to me, as I had known he would, the extremely difficult task of informing his wife. It was then that he revealed to me that his secret was an invisible screen between the two who loved and trusted each other so much. His blood pressure had been high for a long time. He had had heart attacks too. But on those occasions he had convinced his wife that these were a kind of epileptic fit. This was the only malady she did not consider fatal. I was to tell her the same thing now.

I carried the deceitful secret like a dagger under my clothes. The dagger hurt my flesh but with an effort I concealed my pain and managed to get off the train at the right station, walk down the eighth road and enter the sitting room decorated with clay dolls, brassware and the badminton cup.

The fear on his wife's face—the usual fear whenever he was delayed—almost left her when I explained to her that he was in the hospital with an epileptic fit. She not only invited me to sit down but even went in and got me a cup of tea before she changed. The tea made by her at home

while her husband was in hospital with a heart attack tasted to me like poison. And the secret in which I had become a partner seemed to me as frightful as murdering one's friend. How many drink poison because they cannot accept this tragedy that all of us have to face at some time. How many sit waiting with daggers behind those whom they love. And yet, when it comes, poison ceases to be poison. A dagger ceases to be a dagger. Certificates and receipts are no longer certificates and receipts. All are forgiven. All are fools.

I sat waiting at my friend's bedside the whole day, ignoring the precarious situation I had reached in my job. He did not die, he survived. His wife did not realise that she had been invited into a pyre that had just blazed and burned itself out before her.

In the evening, it was with a deeply sorrowing heart and with wounded confidence that I went back. It was a day on which so much had happened. It did not seem in any way encouraging, though a man had escaped death. This gain did not take me forward on my path even by an inch.

Anyway, where was I going? Which way was forward, which backward? I walked on clearing the forests around me and as I walked on they closed in again behind me. I was always on an island, without a front or rear, unable to look back, echoing my own voice, incapable of seeing anything but myself. Ultimately, this island would also sink, forests would grow over me and I'd be caught in the noose that was myself... .

It was dark when I got down from the train. There was no need to hurry as I had informed my wife through a neighbour's phone that I would be late. Taking the state of things into account, I finally took a firm decision to go and see the chemist. He had promised to get me a job, after all.

Though he owned a big medical shop, he lived in a rather ordinary house. A two-room flat. He was unmarried. As soon as he saw me he ran forward and put his arms around

me and led me respectfully to the sofa in his sitting room. He asked to be forgiven for not having come to see me the previous day as he had promised to do. He took it upon himself to say at the same time, that he had no real reason on his side for such dereliction of duty and that he did not know how anyone could forgive him. Even when I sat down, he would not. He stood next to me with his hands folded in front of him, like a supplicant. After the usual greetings and formalities I described to him all the difficulties of my situation. I was becoming useless in the sales manager's eyes. It was true that my interest in the job had waned. Was it not natural, since I had begun to lose my faith in the merits, strength and durability of the company's products? And yet, did I not go on acting a role, embellishing, talking, convincing others with my efforts, as much as I could and even more, hiding all these secret doubts and apprehensions? Even though it was terribly painful to me?

The chemist listened to everything. I saw his eyes fill and his face grow pale. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my eyes. Even when I stopped talking, he stood there a while, transfixed. After that he shook his head slowly a few times. He said that he was all the more convinced now that a salesman's job did not suit me at all. 'It doesn't matter. I've found a good job for you. Something that will suit you.' Coming near, he placed his hand on my shoulder, smiled and said, 'Don't worry. Should such a catastrophe occur, just take up the telephone and tell me, no matter what time it is. The medical shop is open day and night, for twenty-four hours...are you not tired now? Shall I bring you a brandy?'

He brought a bottle and glasses, poured out brandy in a glass and gave it to me. He came and sat on the sofa near me with his own glass and started to talk. He advised me about the necessity of taking care of my health after the attack of typhoid. He prescribed a few tonics and promised

to send them over the next day through the boy in the shop. 'Look, health is very valuable to human beings. Without it nothing has value. The body is the most important of all...by the way, let me ask you, how is my Munna? I'm coming over next Sunday. Now and then, I have a great longing to take him into my arms... . It is a great honour for me that you have visited my small house. It was my fault that I did not invite you. How worthless we human beings are, each by himself. Man cannot live without other human beings. This is what I value most; this friendship, this relationship. All of us in this world are brothers. One must help others as much as one can to alleviate their pain. Isn't that so? And along with that, spend one's own life as agreeably as possible, enjoy it. Shall I pour another drink? Today, we are here; tomorrow, we must leave. Once we die, what is left?'

Nothing.

We drank to nothingness. Celebrated, like friends who had met after a long time; we talked, jested, laughed.

We hardly knew that time passed. It was very late at night when we got up. He followed me to the door.

As we reached the door laughing and shaking hands, my eyes fell on a black, six-foot, oxygen cylinder which had been kept behind the door. The gas was coming out of its open valve with a fearful hissing sound. Startled, I screamed as if I had seen a ghost. My body quivered like a banyan leaf. Blood seemed to gush to my mouth. I was conscious of anger, sorrow, helplessness, nausea, all together. So this is what lies beyond my mood of celebration, conversation, lightheartedness. I felt as I would have felt towards an evil magician. Indistinct words fell from my lips. My hand reached out almost unconsciously to close the valve.

He did not restrain me. Pale from head to foot, speechless, he just stood there with bent head. But even as I closed the valve I felt sorry for my behaviour. Poor man. How

badly I had behaved. After all, none of this was his fault. The death, the misfortunes which befell me one after another; my degradation in the office, my alienation, my drift. The responsibility for this was neither his nor the communist's, nor even the crematory clerk's. All of them had come forward only to help. To show me the right path. To give me oxygen to breathe, to offer me the hope of a good morrow, to help me to secure the death certificate. I was an ungrateful man, who saw cruelty and sorcery everywhere. I asked the chemist's forgiveness. 'Life is only for a couple of days,' he said, his hand on my shoulder. He smiled kindly. Thanking the good man for a pleasant evening, I walked out into the night.

Through the deserted market, through the road with its advertisement for orange-squash, the housing society's park sleepy in the radiance of the fluorescent lamps, through the life where the liftman drowsily pressed a switch, to my eighth floor home, to the mischievous pranks of my children, into the arms of my wife, into life.

The night again, I talked to my wife of my sorrow. Perhaps she understood nothing of it all. But she rebuked me for grieving, she wept. She believed in my capacities, she believed in me; therefore she was not prepared to believe in my sorrow, she resisted it.

12

It was late when I got up in the morning. Directly after my bath and breakfast I went to the station. What was the use of going to the burning ground? In the last two days even the burning ground had ceased to be important. All emptiness. There was no one I knew. No one I could even recognise. What remained now was an office. Only that. The salesman. The products. The market. My briefcase and tie.

I did not board the first train which came. I sat on the bench on the platform, put my briefcase on my lap and rested my elbows on it. Took out my handkerchief and wiped my face. Took out a cigarette and lit it. Then making a decision, I threw away the cigarette and got up. If I lost the job, I'd lose not the job alone but my wife and the whole family. Nothing was important to me. I was alone. This was a question of life and death to me. I walked with firm footsteps—to the municipal death office.

My taxi had two breakdowns on the way. The first time the driver and I repaired it together and he drove it again. The second time it could not be repaired. I stood in the middle of the express highway which had not a patch of shade on it and waved my hand at every passing taxi, car and lorry. No one stopped. I did not give up. At last, after an hour's efforts, covered with dust and sweat, when I was ready to collapse, the driver of a truck carrying earth gave me place on the open shutterless seat beside him. He did

not ask me anything. Looking straight at the road, he drove on. When we reached the municipal death office he stopped his vehicle as a bus driver would have done and allowed me to get down.

The municipal death office was a three-storeyed granite building. When I arrived before it, my pulse grew as faint as if I had come face to face with an unforeseen calamity. It required more effort to climb the seven stone steps of the building than it had taken me to reach there. I rested a little after climbing each flight. When I had climbed the seventh flight, I saw before me a verandah as vast as a field, and three passages that opened onto the right, left and centre from the verandah. They looked like subterranean passages. Here and there, an old clerk, walking with head bent, now surfaced from, now drowned into their profound darkness. Peons slept on the stools placed at the door of each room that opened out from the passages. People did not speak. The sound of typewriters and noises that might have been made by hammers or saws could be heard occasionally. The whole building was enveloped in an odour like that of sawdust.

I shook the peon I saw at the first door by his shoulders, asked him to excuse me for having woken him up thus and inquired of him where the department of transfers was. I immediately corrected it to the department of death certificates. Then again to that of transfers. Finally, ashamed of my uncertainty and ignorance, I grew silent. The peon did not get angry with me or mock me. Making a sign with his hand that could either mean that he was not to be questioned or that he did not know of either of the two departments, he simply dozed off once again.

I stood there foolishly in the corridor. It was wrong to have come to this vast office without proper instructions. How and from whom could I obtain instructions in a world which discouraged, disappointed and even misguided one.

With what great effort I had won over the crematory clerk and secured even this information.

Summoning all my courage I went in through an open door. Approaching the man who sat at the biggest table, I asked him to forgive me for bothering him: 'I am making inquiries about a crematory clerk who was recently transferred from one of the burning grounds in the city. Could you tell me where he has been transferred? A man with one slightly stunted ear, a wide mouth, a snub nose?'

The man who sat at the table stared at me for a little while. Then, either ignoring all that I had asked or, like all clerks in all crematories and offices, taking for granted that the right to speak first was his, he demanded: 'Hm, what do you want?'

I repeated what I wanted. Encouraged because he seemed willing to listen, I related a summary of the long story to him starting with the death. My voice was trembling towards the end. I panted. My eyes filled. I was bathed in sweat. Almost unconsciously, I had taken out the receipt for ten rupees that the old clerk had given me from my pocket and was holding it out. After having listened to everything, after making sure that all the strength left in this weakling, who had not fully recovered his health after an attack of typhoid, had been drained out, the cruel man said: 'Do you know the name of the crematory clerk?'

I did not know. I had not asked the clerk his name. I knew him only as a man with a snub nose, a stunted ear, and a wide mouth. The man sitting at the table did not know of such a man. My eyes slipped uselessly over the files stacked all over his table and on the shelves around. Would not his name and the details of his transfer be on a page of one of them? Would not the deceased man's name and death certificate be there? But even if they were there, there was no way of finding out. Though the files and papers were just in front of me, they were innaccessible to me.

Like the bundles of bones in the burning ground these too had not been catalogued. The histories of those who had been transferred and of those who had died lay in a chaotic disorder. Or else, those who had moved from the area of light into darkness had neither name nor individuality. They were simply known by the name of a general category: as those who had been transferred or those who had died. In this city where there are hundreds and thousands of people, it is difficult to find even those who stand in the light. Then what of those who have gone beyond recall, who are silent, formless, hidden, like the sun which has set? Everything keeps fading beyond recall, beyond memory.

Very long corridors. Stairways. The next floor. Corridors there too. Stairways. I walked aimlessly. I lost myself in the unknown depths of the building. I did not know for how long and where. Aware only of the movement of my feet, I walked on. As I walked, darkness closed in from all around me. Silence settled down. An extraordinary area of experience came into being. Sunk in the pain and helplessness of its embrace, I came up at last against a wall. Pressing my face to it I wept for a long time. When my eyes cleared after long weeping, I lifted my face and looked up. In front of me, wonder of wonders, I saw a shining new board—'Personnel Officer'. The first board that I had seen in that building. Below the board was a door. Before the door, a sleeping peon.

Not heeding the closed door or the sleeping peon, I pushed with my shoulders, and got in. What happened next was extraordinary. An air-conditioned room. A new, glass-topped table with not a single paper on its vast surface. Before it sat the personnel officer, elderly, cleanshaven, wearing a newly-pressed suit. He got up as if he had been expecting me, smiled and invited me to sit down.

He waited till I got back my breath and the sweat dried

on me. He ordered a cup of tea for me. After that he listened attentively to the entire story I related to him. He clarified his doubts about certain parts that he had not understood. Then he expressed his sympathy for me. Promised to do whatever he could, though mine was a very difficult case. To fulfil his promise, he took up his telephone, the only object of utility he had in the room and established contact with the death certificate department.

I watched with astonishment while he gained access so easily through the telephone, to the department that had eluded me so hopelessly all these days.

When he heard a voice from the death certificate department, he held out the receiver towards me.

I grabbed the telephone in my hand with a fast-beating heart. A harsh, unemotional voice asked me my name, address and profession. Then those of the deceased. Like someone in the witness-box, I told him all. When I had finished, the voice began to cross-examine me.

'Why do you need the death certificate?'

Why? What answer could I give? Who had ever answered that question and when? Not knowing the answer to this elementary question, I looked towards the personnel officer for help. I saw his face fall.

'Death certificates are given only for clear and satisfactory reasons.' The voice continued without waiting for my answer, 'Do you have any such reasons? I mean insurance or an inheritance or partnership or something—'

'No, no, there is nothing like that. Nothing at all. But, do you know...do you...know...'

'Clear and satisfactory reasons,' the voice commanded me.

'Not just satisfaction, I need this...look, it is all clear in my mind...I have nothing but this...this is everything to me...my life, not only mine...oh, God, what must I say—'

There was no reaction from the other side. May be it did

not understand anything. It was only a voice. I could only make sounds. It could not understand... . Why did nobody understand anything?

The phone became silent. I stood there, holding the receiver in my hand, bearing witness to the existence of the death certificate department, which was beyond limits of my vision and was slipping away from the reach of my hearing too.

After a long time I heard the sound of the receiver being put down.

The personnel officer looked at me and shook his head. He kept shaking it, as if it would never be enough; 'You should not have said that.'

But, this is my necessity. This is the truth. If you telephone once more—.'

'There is no use, no use,' the personnel officer said. 'There's just one more thing to be tried. The transfer of your crematory clerk—.'

As I listened avidly, the light in the room went out. The air-conditioner became soundless. The telephone went dead. Everything became silent and motionless like the earth during an eclipse. The personnel officer jumped up, caught hold of my hand and dragged me out of the room. The passage was full of people. They jostled one another, made all kinds of noises. Smoke came in from somewhere. Outside, the bell of a fire engine clanged.

I do not know how long I took to get down through those passages and stairs that were as enveloped in darkness, as suffocating, as the sewers in the bowels of the earth. When I arrived below, I had already lost the personnel officer somewhere. I stood like a spectator in the jostling multitude, watching the smoke rise from one of the three wings of the building, while the fire brigade put up ladders and pumped in water.

One portion of the municipal death office was being

destroyed by fire. Which department was it? The one concerned with death certificates? With transfers? Whatever remained of the deceased in the pages or notesheets of the files was being destroyed. I felt giddy. But I did not fall caught as I was in the thick of the crowd, unable to move. I stood there, my head whirling. No one in that multitude seemed agitated or sorrowful at the calamity that was taking place there. Like the friends and relatives and the crematory workers, who stood before a raging pyre, they all stood with their hands folded and fingers on their lips. Only I felt giddy. No one understood my sorrow.

The fire died down. The fire engines folded their ladders, rolled up their hose pipes and moved away without ringing their bells. The crowd thinned out. I was at liberty to move. To be alone again. I went to the express highway and began to hail the passing taxis.

13

It was drizzling when I awoke the next morning. The sky was overcast. I lay for a long time looking at the darkened sky through the window. When my wife brought in tea and then stood at the window holding on to its bars, I could not see the sky anymore. I lay looking at her carelessly draped sari and her uncombed hair. I felt pity towards her. Poor woman, there would be so many men in this world willing to marry a woman as lovely and as sweet-

natured as she was, to love her and make her happy. It had been her destiny to become my wife. I went and stood near her and put my hand on her shoulder. A cool breeze pushed in through the window. Her hair blew into my face. We did not talk. After a while she raised her hand and wiped her eyes. Moving her hand away, I caressed her eyes and said, 'What is the point of crying? This is our destiny. What cannot be avoided has to be accepted.'

'That's not so, that is not so,' she sobbed, leaning on me. 'Please believe it's not like that. This misery of ours will change. A good time will come.'

'Everyone thinks that but nothing ever becomes clean. I thought of what the crematory clerk's wife had said, long ago. But my wife and my communist friend are not like me and the clerk's wife. Though they are poles apart ideologically, the two of them and all others like them believe that a good morrow will certainly come. When it got late, when today came and stood before tomorrow, I performed my daily rituals and wearing my raincoat and cap in addition to taking my briefcase and tie, I set out for the office.

The communist telephoned from his office. I had not thought that he would start going to the office so soon. I had told him that I would accompany him when he resumed going to his office and so I asked him not to start till I reached. The Party office was not very far from my way to the station. When he saw me his face really shone with happiness. He had grown very weak in two days. Only when I saw him standing up did I realise the change in him. Though he did not say so, it was clear that he was deeply relieved when I arrived to help him.

He introduced me to Party leaders whose names I had often seen in the papers. He told me that many of them were theoreticians and experts in organising; that some had spent long periods in hiding or in jail. I was amazed at the torment they had endured simply for the sake of their

belief in a new future. My friend himself did so much work ignoring his weakness and blood pressure. Files, ledgers and account books lay piled one over the other on his table. I wondered how he could go through all these at least once a day. Yet he not only went through them, he wrote accounts in the files, prepared drafts and replied to audit objections. 'Once something disappears into these files, it is impossible to get at it when one wants,' he muttered while at his work, 'The programme for the transport workers' strike beginning tomorrow has to be submitted for the secretary's approval. The file has not yet come back from the union president.'

I asked him, 'Will the strike be cancelled, then, if it does not come?'

'That doesn't matter. The strike has to take place sometime.' He was certain about it. 'The working class will certainly rise and revolt.'

No one sat idle in the Party office. Everyone worked feverishly. From the chairman down to the peon and sweeper, everyone there believed in the inevitability of revolution. Since the working class will in any case rise and the revolution come, I advised him in the train that he should take care of his own health; that he should live, if not for himself, at least for his wife and children. He undertook to do so.

14

Conditions in the office improved a great deal in the next few days. One of our engineers who was related through his wife to a foreman in the government establishment, approached him and managed to get a good portion of the rejected machines passed. He had the previous report rewritten to state that the machines had been described as substandard due to a temporary oversight. He also managed to have the order to blacklist the company withdrawn. To express my personal gratitude and happiness for this great gain, I invited him and his wife to dinner in one of the city restaurants on Saturday night. The two of us and our wives spent a very enjoyable evening together.

My wife, encouraged by this dinner, urged me to invite my sister and her husband to our house, and I accordingly did so. It was the time when my brother-in-law's younger brother had fallen in love with a tribal girl from the hills where he was posted and had decided to marry her. My sister and her husband seemed very enthusiastic about this idea. We spent most of the time discussing the impending marriage and the amusing things that might happen when he came to the city with his tribal bride. My sister was very eager that they should have a child. Though many things kept coming to my mind I tried not to change the subject. I decided that instead of initiating anything I would only join in the conversation others had started.

And yet when we saw a funeral pyre blazing in the

distance through the open window all of us suddenly fell silent. The silence was broken when my little son came in. His mischievous pranks made everyone laugh and to our relief the conversation shifted to other topics. We talked about the naughtiness of children and laughed. I also joined in with my contribution and we all laughed again.

A poem I had learnt in school said that death surrenders when confronted with life. The banner of life will not be lowered for death and so on. All of us believed in that poem; all the students and teachers who lived on this side of death, as one would believe in a national anthem. My wife, when she sobbed on my breast saying 'It is not so, believe me it is not so', or my communist friend, exhausted though he was with a heart attack, when he said that the working class would rise in revolt and the revolution was inevitable—did they not believe in this same banner? I feared that someone might start singing the national song about the flag that cannot be lowered. But that did not happen. It was not necessary because victory was ensured. There was no need to feel any triumph when they were definitely victorious. Or perhaps the victory went unnoticed.

In the midst of all this, I visited the library many times. I told my friend about the transfer of the crematory clerk and the strange happenings in the municipal death office. I told him how many petitions I had submitted, how many forms I had filled, how many receipts I had treasured. Could anyone measure the distance I had walked? What value did my tears, my sweat, have? Was anything of any use? Everything was burning. Singing praises of products without strength or durability, visiting the same places over and over again, repeating the same words, laughing without being amused, walking, running, fainting—only to fall down and die at last at some level crossing or on a step of the staircase between the eight floors. The pilgrimage through furrows. The bull that draws the plough has no

destination. He might at last begin to detest the yoke. That was my fear. I needed this yoke...at least this yoke.

The librarian looked agitated. He did not speak for a long time. Then he got up and came to me. Putting his hand on my shoulder, the elderly, good-natured man consoled me: 'During the voyage of time, in the course of each problem, do you know in how many places, how many times, fires have blazed? Palaces, libraries, whole cities...why, think even of a pyre in the burning ground. Is there a more fearful conflagration than that? Did not this very problem of ours start from a pyre?'

15

As my life moved forward at a normal pace, I had many occasions to visit the library. We took out books, searched, read, talked, lost ourselves in thought. It seemed to us a novelty to even think that the world outside was immersed in making and selling machines, in revolutionary activities, in the sale of medicines, in love affairs with tribal girls. Compared to them, sitting in the library turning over books, talking and not talking, we were inactive. Not that we did not have the creative instinct within us. We had as much skill to do those things as they had. And we had done them too. It was only that we were now away from it all. We could not understand how or why they could do these things.

Why had I not felt like this when I had gone up and down the steps of offices and firms, with catalogues and price lists and samples, when I had known contentment in marrying and loving my wife, in fondling my children? Why did I feel this now?

I had been doing the job of a salesman for more than fourteen years. In that time I must have been in and out of thousands of offices and firms. How many people I must have met and talked to. I had not quarrelled with anyone. I had not even had a difference of opinion. All this, not only because it would have been against my ethical sense to do so but because it came naturally. This was what had helped me to be sucessful in my life as a salesman all these years. Success does not mean that I had secured enormous contracts or that I had led my firm from ordinary profits to bigger ones. It just means that I had stayed on in my job. For fourteen years. My firm too had survived. In this state of continuity the only times when I had experienced strain or pressure or friction or estrangement was when my manager grew more conscious of profits. Or when I began to be conscious of losses. Or when we had fears or misgivings about the state in which there was neither profit nor loss.

That was exactly why the chemist, who had his doubts about my success, had told me that a salesman's job was not suited to me, and that he would look for another job for me instead.

'Come to think of it, this good morrow that everyone talks about is not situated in space, but in time.' I told the librarian. 'In that case however far one goes in search of it one will not reach it. But if one sits quietly, it will come by itself. Even if one merely moves along the furrow.

The librarian looked through the window into the garden. I wondered if he had listened to what I had said. After a long time he said in a voice that seemed imbued with sadness: 'He who moves the lawn mower has only the

lawn mower to cling on to. And he who is drowning, only water. It is not in time or space, but here, around us, now. We have only this tangle, this noose as our refuge.'

When struggling for breath with that noose around me, how many times I have reached out as a last straw for the X-ray film and the chinagraph pencil. I would take the film and change the date. Go to a new radiologist. I would throb with pain and weep. Then, wipe my eyes, bend my head, and walk away, relieved.

I spent about a month shuttling between the office, my home and the library. When I got ready for my next pilgrimage to the death office the librarian undertook to come with me. With the intention of making a thorough investigation we decided to start early. I arrived at the station at the appointed time. The librarian came by the train that he had said he would take. Alighting, he came straight over to where I waited below the family planning poster. We did not speak. Like friends going to join a funeral procession, like thieves setting out on a secret mission, we walked, immersed in ourselves. We came out of the station and got into a taxi at the taxi stand. When we reached the express highway, leaving the narrow streets of the market area behind, the taxi driver increased his speed. Not looking to the left or the right, he sped along

the deserted highway which passed through open waste-land. We sat behind looking out through the window.

Sitting there like that, I dozed off. He too. When I opened my eyes, the taxi had entered the gate of the death office and was turning into the drive. I shook the librarian awake.

A solid granite building. The verandah like a vast open space. Three subterranean passages and three wings branching off from the verandah. Clerks and peons. Typewriters and files. The municipal death office was immersed in work as usual. There was not even a sign of there having been a fire earlier.

I did not stand perplexed like last time. Without trying to make enquiries of the peon or the clerk, we climbed the stairs, went past the passages to the third floor and waiting to regain our breath before the last room on our left in the passage, below the board marked 'Personnel Officer'. When we got our breath back, glancing at each other we made a decision. Ignoring the closed door and the sleeping peon, we pushed in with our shoulders.

The Personnel Officer recognised me and welcomed me amiably. When I introduced the librarian, as my close friend and as the librarian of one of the biggest libraries in the city, he told us that he did not know how to express his happiness at having been able to make the acquaintance of such a person. And it was quite true that he did not know how. He kept getting up agitatedly from his chair many times, groping on the empty desk for something, smiling and sitting down again. Then as each one tried to adapt himself to the other's presence, as our sweat dried, our heartbeats quietened, and we were ready, the three of us found ourselves deep in conversation. In truth, though I was the one distressed by death, though the librarian was a friend whom I had come to know after the death and the Personnel Officer was only a mere personnel officer in a

municipal death office, a very special kind of relationship was being formed at that time amongst the three of us. Each of us understood the other. We were each contented in the presence, the speech of the other. We had become a small society—I, sorrowing, wandering in search of proof; the librarian who sympathised with me; the municipal officer who was trying to help me.

We did not realise how much time we had spent like that. Finally, after having drunk tea twice or thrice and smoked a number of cigarettes, we agreed unhappily to the painful but unavoidable fact that it was utterly futile to approach the department of death certificates until my friend the old crematory clerk could be traced. The Personnel officer took great pains to logically co-ordinate my hopeful questions with my friend's experienced knowledge in affairs concerning records and guide the discussion correctly. On account of the patience that had grown out of my misfortune and because it had become a habit with me through my profession, I kept thanking him often for his kindness gentleness and helpful attitude. He said that if one person was good or even if everyone was good, there still were such things as rules and regulations. Consequently the individual is always helpless. 'Look, there is a rule of action for everything. Your capacity to hope and search is not there because you wish for this capacity. So also, if the rules of the world are such that you will not find anything after your search then you can't do anything about it.'

Finally we stopped talking and left the room. With the Personnel officer leading us, we went through corridors, descended stairs, cut across verandahs and halls and came at last to a room. We climbed a mezzanine floor on one side of the room, which perhaps was added to it at a later stage in order to store records. The officer warned us not to make any noise with our shoes on the wooden surface of

the mezzanine floor since it would disturb those working below. We walked on tip-toe, taking care not to hit our heads against the beams of the ceiling.

At first it seemed as if there were only shelves and racks there. But as we walked on, we found a small table and behind the table a clerk who kept taking out stacks of files from the shelves, putting them on the table, searching through them one by one and, not finding what he wanted, putting them back on the shelves. He was thin and middle aged with broken spectacles and a shirt torn at the shoulder. As we went in he was throwing a stack of files back onto the shelf, cursing and starting to take out another. Taking care not to hit his head on the beam, he bent and looked towards us.

Quite surprised, he looked at each of us in turn. He did not seem to recognise the officer. On the contrary, when I saw how, though he was an officer in that institution, the personnel officer appealed to him with humility, respect and fear, I recalled what he had said about the helplessness of man before rules and regulations. After having studied us awhile, he asked, most indifferently: 'Which file do you want?' and started searching again for a file, without waiting for an answer. Seeing my misery, the librarian himself took the initiative and informed him that we did not want any particular file and that we had come to enquire about the transfer of a crematory clerk.

'It's difficult enough to find a file, not to talk of finding specific cases.' The clerk took another stack of files and threw it on the shelf. Avoiding the beam, he moved back a bit and sighed. 'Do you know, how many days I've been looking for a file? See here. This is what happened when a pile slipped down from the top. And this when a nail on a shelf scratched me.' He showed us his broken spectacles and torn shirt.

We expressed our sympathy for his misfortune and asked forgiveness for our intrusion. We had come because it was a

very important, very urgent case. Otherwise we would never have bothered him.

'Tell me, what's the case?' He sounded kind.

I narrated my whole story in brief starting with the death. Timidly I also informed him of the painful truth that I did not know the name of the crematory clerk.

'Ha!' The clerk threw back his head and sighed as if everything I had said till now was useless.

All three of us bowed our heads like criminals.

'Do you at least know when this transfer took place?' The clerk raised his head after sometime and asked.

'I don't know the exact date. Probably it is about a month and a half ago'.

'So old a case, so old—' the clerk shook his head.

'Do you know to how many places the file would have gone by now? You've brought a very difficult case.'

At this point, my friend said that he was a librarian by profession, and if permitted, he would offer the knowledge and experience he had acquired through his profession in hunting for records. when he heard this, the clerk's undaunted face blossomed into brightness. 'Certainly, certainly.' He extended both his hands in invitation.

So started a great ritual. In this Herculean task, it was my friend the librarian who gave all of us, even the section clerk, expert guidance. It is needless to say how greatly his experience in cataloguing and indexing helped us. We attacked the shelves individually and collectively, according to a planned programme. The files and registers which had been lying in confusion and without any particular order of manner, except that the first came at the bottom and the last came at the top began to acquire some order and shape as we proceeded systematically in our work. No sooner did we take down a fat, heavy file, then a cloud of dust blinded us. We stood stooping under the low

ceiling and projecting beams of the mezzanine floor, walking on tip-toe so as not to disturb those working below. Only a slender ache kept us closely bound to this mighty task without being discouraged or disappointed. That tender and at the same time great pain lay knotted around the heart of the insignificant man that I was. It grew tighter and tighter every day, it lay and writhed within it-self like a dying man.

But all for nothing. Nowhere amongst those worn, dustladen papers did we find anything about a crematory clerk with a stunted ear, a wide mouth, and flat nose. In any case, how could we have found it. Those who are moved from the area of light into darkness lose shape and form. And yet, we kept taking whatever files we could lay our hands on and turning them over. Not knowing what, where, how, to search. Each time we finished with a file, the good, diligent clerk closed it with a bang, raised his head and said, 'Oh, if only you had known his name,' and sighed, 'Ha!'

Finally,. tired out, when we sat down to rest a little on a stool and a box lying there, my friend the librarian had an idea. 'Just one thing, one thing'. Not able to control his excitement, he jumped up from the box and cried, 'Since the war has started now, don't you think that he may have been transferred to the front? Is that not where they will need experienced clerks? Especially when he has left in such a hurry, without even handing over charge.'

My friend's passionate excitement soon spread to all of us. Like him, all of us jumped up ignoring the low roof. 'I know, I know,' the clerk called out and disappeared some-where among the racks. While we stood dazed, he came back from somewhere, holding a file as high as he could. Not even waiting to dust it, he pulled open the tape on the file that was marked 'military transfers'.

I do not know whether one feels delight or astonishment when one finds a paper that one has grown tired of searching

for on the first page of a file that one opens. Not only the paper, but also the passport-size photograph of the old crematory clerk. Spectacles slipping down the nose, stunted ear, flat nose, a pendulous lower lip—my eyes fixed themselves on that lower lip. Tears gushed in an unceasing stream from my eyes. I was surprised at the sense of gratification that I felt,—as though I was standing face to face with the truth I had been searching for—although that truth still lay far beyond this photograph, beyond the transfer order and the receipt he had given me, even far beyond the death certificate itself. Unimaginably far, like the sun which has set. Even though I was aware of that loss as always, I had a feeling of gratification.

Neither I, nor perhaps even those who stood around me, knew how long I stood there thus, slipping from that height of pain, as if through a cascade of helplessness, into that unusual, strange and never cruel joy. An outburst of weeping arose from the thin, weak throat of the clerk of the records section and broke the continuity, that helpless connection between two things, one wrong and the other non-existent. He closed the file marked 'military transfers' dramatically, with a bang and threw it away. Then he told us, between sobs, that it was impossible to obtain the address of those who were transferred into the army or to trace them; that all that could be done was to wait for them—if they ever came back someday.

The clerk did not dare to look me in the face. Indeed, after that, he did not look at me at all.

Once more, I realised the nature of my fate that I had already realised a hundred times. There was no need for anyone to tell me where I stood, what I could hope for. And yet, each time, I needed to tell myself these things.

After that, we had nothing more to do there. The clerk who did not dare to face me, ceased to weep and expressed to the personnel officer his regret at having been unable

to help me. Though he knew it was not proper to mention it at such a time, he spoke of his gratitude to the librarian for his expert guidance, which had enabled him to arrange his wildly scattered files in order. Leaving him to search for his missing file, we descended.

We walked, leaving behind corridors and stairways. The personnel officer followed us silently till we reached the front verandah. When we began to descend the last seven steps, he suddenly became eloquent. In the short time it took to descend those seven steps, he spoke of how uncertain it was whether the crematory clerk who had gone to the battlefield would return; of the unauthorised nature of my search for which I had no clear or satisfactory reasons to offer and of the general meaninglessness of all my efforts. He pointed out that it was futile to cherish memories. Then, like a secret partisan of life who was locked in the cells of that great granite death office, he lowered his voice and chanted the national anthem about the banner of life that would never be lowered. We did not reply to any of these things. Placing both his hands on our shoulders and standing between us, he followed us down, a good way behind us. He hurried to finish what he had to say, as if he could not go beyond those steps.

When we walked away from the seventh step, he stood transfixed on his step, in front of that heavy stone building, with arms outstretched, like a bird whose wings had broken off. Still standing on the seventh step, he called out to us in a trembling voice, as we walked farther and farther away from him, that he liked our company very much and that we must continue to come whenever we had time. We did not reply to that either, nor did we turn and look back.

17

There were no taxis in front of the office. Nor did we bother to go up to the highway crossing to hail one. We walked on silently to the nearest railway station, looking ahead.

When we reached the municipal market, we went in. We walked aimlessly down the vegetable and fish stalls, looking at the blossoming faces of the cauliflowers and the rounded eyes of dead fish. We stopped awhile in front of a bangle stall. My friend bought a few balloons from a balloon man. After a while, he let them drift up into the sky.

When we arrived at the overbridge, we stood for a long time with our hands on the parapet, looking down. After many trains had passed by, we went on.

We elbowed our way into the train when it came on to the platform. Using each other as a mutual prop and aid, we journeyed with the others. We got down at my station. Once home, we looked at the numbers on each floor flash past through the door in the lift and then reached the eighth.

The first time we spoke after having left the death office was when I introduced him to my wife. My wife smiled and said namaste. He greeted her in return. Bringing tea and biscuits, she sat in a chair opposite us and talked to him of many things, I do not know what. But I am sure neither she nor my friend talked of the death certificate.

Once the formalities were over, my wife withdrew to her domestic chores. Silent once more, we looked at each

other. When we grew tired of this, we went to the balcony and looked out. Meanwhile it had become dark. A breeze blew. When the smoke from a passing train spread out and faded away, we saw the fire blazing in the crematory far away. Tongues of fire flashed through the louvres of the shed. Next to it stood the two-storeyed building that was the clerk's office and quarters.

It seemed a long, long, time ago that I had sat here watching a man drift away from his surroundings, sever his connections with each man, with each living being, and tighten himself more and more into his own private noose. When immobility advanced, driving in nail after nail from all sides; when the final nail sank in with a last quiver, I took that body, laid it on a bamboo bier, wrapped it in a white shroud and bore it to that establishment of the municipality which was yet unfamiliar to me. A long, long, time ago. After that, how wide that door of unfamiliarity opened before me. How it had closed behind me once I entered. How it had imprisoned me. How I had been forced to drown, to grope, in its depths, its darkness. I stumbled against its walls, I hit myself against its roof and fell. I lay inside and whirled endlessly, yet even after aeons had passed I still remained a stranger to it since I was a prisoner there. Even today, as I stand on this balcony and watch the flames blaze and writhe through the louvres, I experience again the heat I felt when the pyre burnt that day. I felt that death was not an end, that it too had an existence like life. Death continued to live in me.

'So many die. So many pyres blaze in different burning grounds. Bones are collected, deposited in the sea. Who collects whose bones?' my friend said, looking at the flames in the burning ground. 'In any case, what difference does it make, who receives whose remains? Where the pyres blaze, or who dies? Each fragment that remains is finally someone's proof. Bundles taken by mistake, renewed receipts,

piled-up-books...coming to think of it, instead of a multitude of proofs, we seem to be approaching the principle that there is only a single piece of evidence, which though elusive and hidden is all pervasive, unchanging and powerful.'

'But this sorrow is not common to all,' I protested. 'This is mine. The pain which lies twisted in me, which is my noose. I cannot mistake it for another like a bundle of bones or exchange it like renewed receipts. This is part of myself—'

'Yes, this pain is yours. Your estate and legacy. It is everything for you. It opened your eyes. When your eyes opened, doubts arose in you. You became mad; you became yourself. Had you not known this pain, you would have remained just one among lakhs and lakhs of salesmen...but only this pain is yours. Neither the fate that caused it, nor the salvation that is its end, is yours. Those are common to all. On the path of the journey from a common fate to a common salvation, your pain gave you an occasion to see yourself as you are.'

'Fate. Only fate. There is no salvation,' I said. 'The journey is only from fate to fate. This suffering is the suffocation within the embrace of fate. The suffering of captivity that knows no liberation.'

'Captivity is not just the prevention of liberation,' he smiled. 'It is also the desire for liberation. That embrace is, in one way, salvation too. Had you not known the suffocation of this sorrow you would not have known the possibility of deluge. You would not have sought salvation from it. You would not have known that there is no salvation. Going through it, you realised your fate that existed beyond space and time, always and everywhere around you. And the salvation that was nowhere and never. Or your fate that was also your salvation. Life may be futile. But it is not purposeless.'

Far away in the burning ground the pyre died down. The burning ground itself disappeared in darkness. Electric lights showed up everywhere, like tiny, motionless pyres, like lamps sunk in water, like images of lights. We stood quietly, as if bearing testimony to everything, or as if waiting for something. For what? Another pyre? Our pyre? The pyre that blazed within us, unquenchingly, no matter how much water we poured on it? Fate? Salvation?

It grew late at night.

Before going away into the late night he counselled me to make a record of my sufferings. To write them down and to deposit them volume after volume in the library.

'No, no,' I opposed him. 'If ever my unhappy pen jots down anything, it will be only to soothe this wound that I bear eternally. The wound is mine. So the nursing is also mine. Only when related to me do these words have any meaning. When I cease to be, they too cease to have any significance. No, I cannot make my sorrow a public thing—'

'Fate is not one man's alone.' He stood on the threshold and caught my hand. 'None of us bears it individually or collectively. Rather, it bears us. We dive into it. Surface. Cling to it. That suffocation is life to us. Like our deluge, our breath is also one; common. Do not forget that.'

Before reaching the lift he came back once more and pressed my hand and walked away hurriedly without looking back. Into the distance. Into his world.

I came back from the threshold. My world for me. That of a husband, a father, a salesman. My house on the eighth floor near the railway line over-looking the burning ground. Looking out from here, I see, beyond the universe contained within these four walls, beyond the view of the city from the balcony, something that grows clearer and clearer—the hard, stony, shape of my fate, yours, ours. And something fades from my view—the evidence that changes constantly, renews endlessly and loses its existence through the

changes and renewals. And down below I can hear the march of oblivion to the accompaniment of the band. And the chant of the national song around the banner that will never be lowered.

I recognised the national song. It reminded me of many voices that I had heard in many places. Whatever they said, everyone spoke in the same voice. Whatever they sang, they sang at the same time. The old woman our neighbour, who fills up the void where her sons were with her grandsons. The crematory clerk who argued that this thing called truth cannot be proved by evidence. The communist who urges that the past must be destroyed, that faith must be placed in the future. The personnel officer who decrees that it is fruitless to seek those who are dead or those who have been transferred. Those who say that life conquers death and those who say that death conquers life sing the same song—the national song, that one's own banner will never be lowered.

Death does not conquer life. Nor life, death. Life and death are the same. Fate itself is salvation. When life and death unite, when fate and salvation cancel each other out and disappear, only one thing remains: character. For me, everything becomes my nature. My pain, the blows of suffering that force me to walk along bearing my yoke and not allowing me to rest, my journey that shows me only furrow after furrow; the persuasive love that commands me to return over and over again to my family, to fondle and caress my children no matter how far I drift away each time; the job that compels me to canvass again and again for the goods that are neither durable nor sustaining—everything. The inevitable nature that makes me what I am. The inevitability of it.

Inevitability.

Because of this very inevitability, after many days—or months, I do not know—on my way to the office, I went

again, swinging my briefcase, to the crematory. With no clear reason or aim. Therefore, I did not have to feel disappointed that the new clerk was not there. He had taken leave and gone away for his daughter's wedding.

After that, years have whirled by. His daughter was married. She had a baby. A lovely little child. I have seen that child crawl, stand, talk. How many times have I taken biscuits for him. Neither the new clerk's aged wife nor his young daughter ever scold me. I have a friendly relationship with them, as I walk in and out of the burning ground. His wife does not show any great interest in washing or wiping the floor. In fact, she has a maid to do all the housework. As for me, having submitted another application, according to the advice of the new clerk, citing as reason the loss of the receipt for firewood and enclosing an affidavit—an indemnity bond, I am still waiting for the death certificate. Instead of the old clerk's receipt for ten rupees, I have one issued by the new clerk now. One without a name, or seal, or date. To show that someone took ten rupees from someone else. All this does not mean that I have totally given up hopes of the old clerk's return. He may well return suddenly one day. If he comes, things might improve. But there is no certainty about his return. The government says that though war is over, peace has not yet been established.

Between war and the absence of peace world affairs go on without a break. The ways of the government sometimes satisfy people, sometimes anger them. The world, immersed in propaganda, in the sale of medicines and in revolutionary activities, marches forward. Ours being a democracy, though we have to stay within the framework of the constitution, everyone has the right to reject what he does not like and to determine his own fate.

They say that the time when firms could make unlimited profits is ended because of government restrictions. However, they have not yet sent me out of the company.

Certainly, my manager still scolds and teases and threatens me on occasions. But this does not mean that no sales take place in my section. Sometimes we secure good orders. Sometimes the market is bad for days. So, it may be taken to mean that my manager, when he lusts after profits pretends not to see good times and always detects misfortunes with an eagle eye. Or perhaps, who knows, I too may be an indispensable adjunct to my company—as long as I am alive.

But I did not fail to keep alive my acquaintance with the chemist. I go to meet him in his two-roomed flat in the evenings on those occasions when I feel that the future is dark. In the air smoothened by oxygen from the cylinder in the corner, we sit like old friends, talking and jesting awhile. He still asks about my son whose infant charm is lost now that he has grown up. He consoles me. Smiles the smile of the priest before the convict. He talks about new and more potent medicines. He has undertaken to send me tonics from his shop. He says that he is more than ever convinced that a salesman's job is no suited to me at all, and that he is looking out for a good job for me. He still has not told me what the job is. Nor has he ever asked me about my qualifications or experience.

Illness is kind to my communist friend too. He has not yet died of heart failure. But because of increasing weakness, he does not go anywhere except to the office. I go and meet him and his wife occasionally. Though time is passing and people are growing old, their love has not waned at all. Brightness might belong to the morrow but there is no staleness in the intoxication of today.... Meanwhile, in the Party office the files pile up in heaps. Audit objections over the accounts multiply themselves. This framework of the constitution is as impenetrable as a complicated military formation, he says. Those who do battle within it without being able to break it are doomed

to perish. But wars go on. Instead of class consciousness, nationalist trends are getting stronger. The hands of the government grow stronger and stronger. The national anthem is everywhere. The possibilities of revolution are steadily receding. Not explosion, but torpor is what awaits everything. The volcano which should erupt suffers from heart failure.... Who knows, he too may have begun to see the radiance of that bright morrow growing dimmer and dimmer and the light of his own pyre grow brighter and brighter? The pyre that was himself, that lent its heat even 'now to his aged but still beautiful wife, that intoxicated her, that coaxed her to fall into it herself? Ultimately when the firewood is stacked, the dead body borne away, and the last remains and signs destroyed, the greatest share in doing all this will be mine. I shall have to wait with the crematory clerk before the blazing fire till the skull explodes.

Away from my office and house, I often go to the library with its unnecessarily long steps, and pillars that bear no weight. Hunting out big volumes from the shelves, I and the librarian bury our heads in them silently. We become sunk in thought. We read again. We do not argue much now. We do not have many differences of opinion. We do not even have opinions. Experiences replace ideas. The papers I write and take to him make excited.

My world does not end there. There is my sister who is still childless; her husband's younger brother who has divorced the tribal girl and has recently married an educated and refined girl from the town; the neighbours who come only when someone dies to say that those who survived must somehow go on; the lift man, the radiologists, the X-ray film, the chinagraph pencil, the vertebra, the reports that appear in the papers about fires in the city; which I read with. impatience—I once seriously thought of resigning my job and joining the fire brigade.

The Death Certificate

Every evening, I return to my house on the eighth floor. As the children grow up, the responsibilities concerning them occupy my mind more than their mischievous pranks. My wife continues to share my life. As she has grown older she has somewhat modified her vision of reality. Now, instead of my total permanence she respects my permanence only as long as she lives. 'Only after I die will my beloved die,' she says in our intimate moments. I do not contradict her.

Whether I oppose it or not, this world has embraced me. This world of transfers and postings, which lives between war and peace; the world of democracy, where, when working for the revolution, accounts alone improve; where more and more faultless drugs come out though sickness never disappears; this indispensable world which makes everyone indispensable. I lie within its embrace and squirm. I fight for breath. For as long as I am alive. But, at the moment when fate and salvation, life and death, medicine and poison all become one, when the water in the Woolf's bottle boils with the speed of the globules that rush by, when I kiss the oxygen that is going back—having knocked at the doors of the lungs and not got entry—and bid it goodbye, I accept that embrace. As it embraces me I embrace it too. My suffocation becomes an intoxication to me.

The clerk at the crematory does not give me an exact date. Nor do I go there on any special day or date. It is usually late when I get up in the mornings. I take longer at the market. I am not physically as strong as before. I cannot walk fast. Yet on the occasions when I feel I have spare time, I think of visiting the crematory on my way to the office. When cutting through the level crossing, I take care to see whether there are trains coming. The old watchman is perhaps dead. I am careful of the new one. There are traffic lights at the highway crossing now.

Therefore if accidents occur at the road crossing, no one can be held responsible, as they are at the railway crossing.

However, even if it is easier to cross the road, it takes longer waiting for the signals. Obstacles appear before me. Overcoming them all, knotting my tie, swinging my briefcase, when I, the salesman, enter, the clerk sometimes smiles. Sometimes, he does not show any familiarity. But most often he is asleep. His slumbers, as he grows older, get deeper and deeper. It becomes progressively harder to wake him up.

Normally, there are pyres burning in the shed. Sometimes they blaze noisily within the circle of relatives, and are fanned by the purohits. Or else there is only the sound of the bones cracking, smouldering, in the loneliness and silence of the shed after everyone has gone away.

Each time I return without the certificate. Even though people have built houses and moved into them in the housing society plot, I still go to the station, through the pathway the railway commuters have made by pulling down the compound wall. On the bench on the platform, I rest with my briefcase on my lap. I wipe my face with a handkerchief and light a cigarette. I let the first train pass by.

Later, travelling in the crowded train, each of us mutually supporting and helping the other lest he fall, I realise everyday the ultimate futility of all efforts. Sleeping continuously, who knows, one day this old man, the new crematory clerk, may sink into a sleep from which there is no waking, without having had occasion to hand over charge to another clerk. I may have to give in more applications. Fill up more forms. One after another all evidence disappears in this world of hurried transfers, unsystematic filing and valueless receipts. But what does all this matter to me? Let crematory clerks die or be transferred. Let files accumulate. Let white ants devour them. Let receipts

disappear. Let wars or revolutions go on. Nothing makes any difference. I do not feel angry with anyone. I am no longer concerned with clerks and receipts. Beaten by suffering, I walk alone, dragging my yoke. As I walk along, this very act of walking becomes the death certificate and this death certificate is also my certificate of life. I begin to realise this supreme truth.

In a nightmarish, bureaucratized world where documentary evidence is the only evidence, a man searches for a death certificate to convince himself of the reality of death—a quest that forces him to re-assess the meaning of existence.

A compelling novel depicting the alienation and *angst* of modern man in a chaotic and meaningless world.

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